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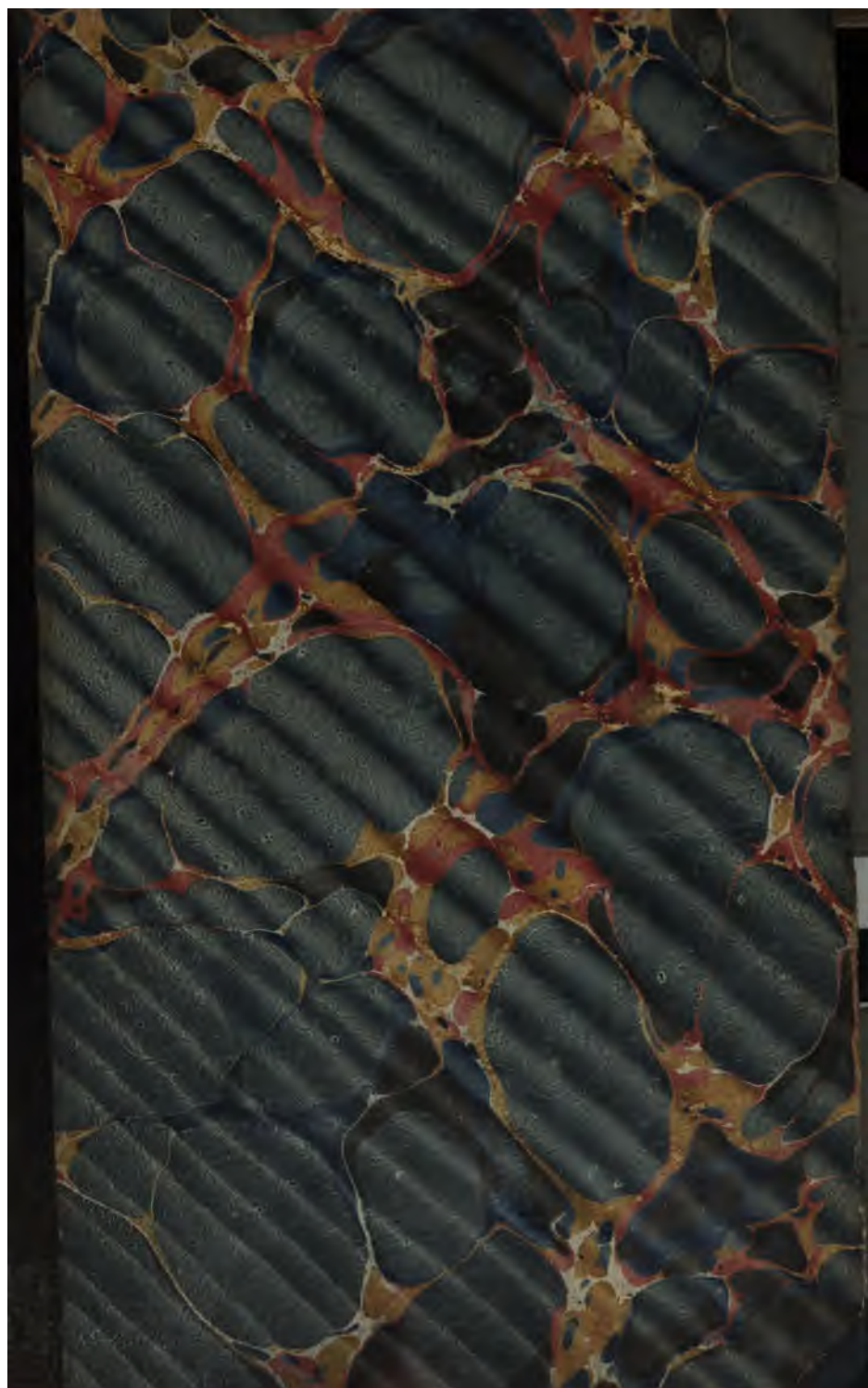
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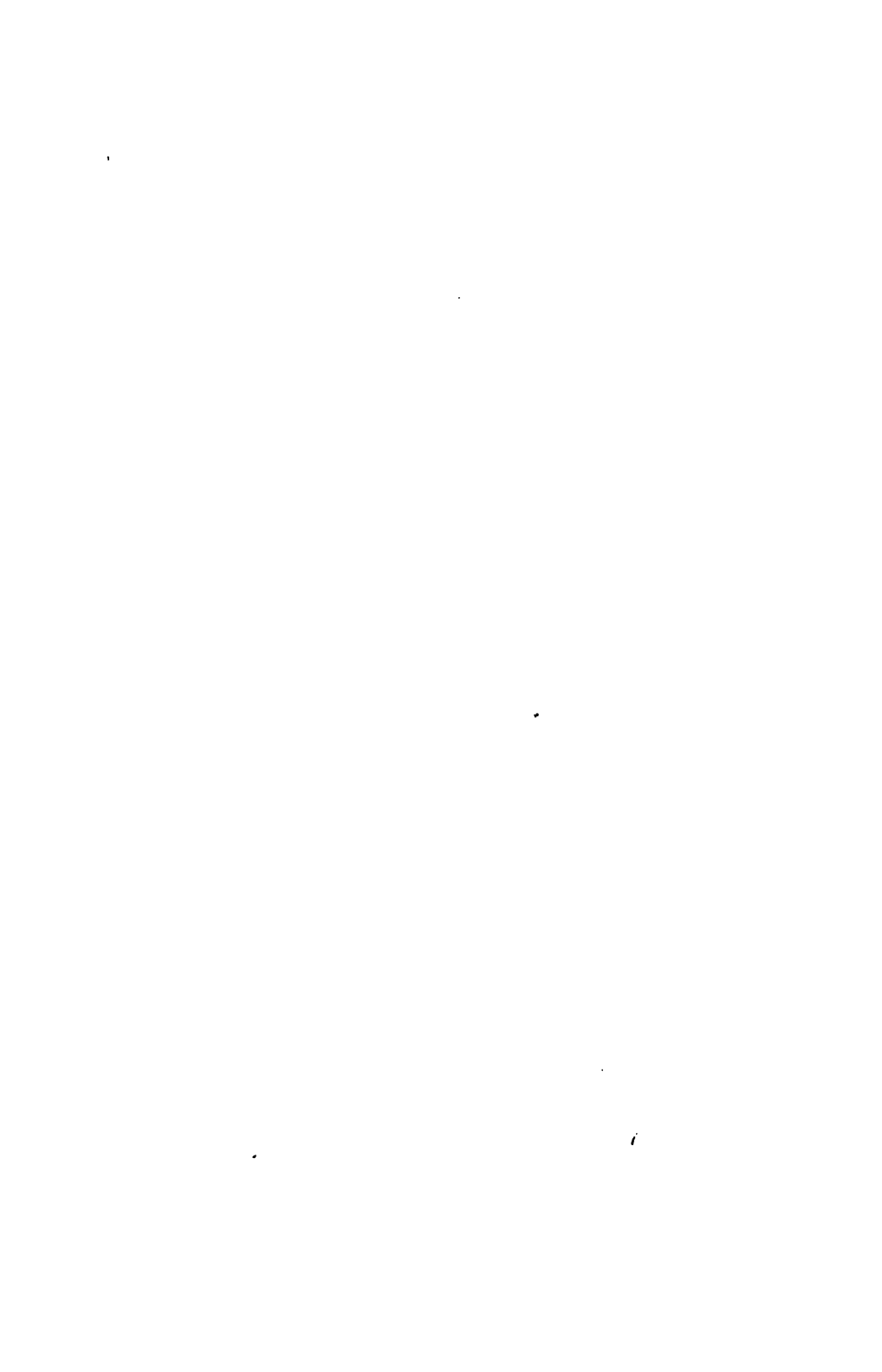
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Author of

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# MASTER AND PUPIL.

## CHAPTER. I.



MONSIEUR AUGUSTE VERMONT.

FROM the very first moment that my astonished eyes fell upon Monsieur Auguste Vermont from Paris, I conceived a strong and unconquerable aversion to him. And yet he was a handsome man, with plenty of conversation, with really polished manners, and evidently anxious for

some cause or other (I am sure it was not admiration) to make himself especially agreeable to me.

Fortunately, however, I was not compelled to endure much of his society, as he and his sister usually went out in the carriage early in the morning, and only returned home in time for dinner. Occasionally indeed we had to dine without them, Monsieur Auguste having prevailed on the Comtesse to accompany him to the theatre or to some evening promenade, where there was music and a fashionable crowd.

I asked Madame Boussin one day how she thought the Comte would approve of the manner in which his wife occupied herself during his absence.

"Oh, the poor man!" she said, with upturned eyes, "he would be mad, absolutely mad; but

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what can be done? When the long prisoned bird gets its liberty, it will fly to the woods and sing aloud for joy. I pity them both sincerely, because their natures never can assimilate, but my strongest sympathies are for the wife, since I know how terrible a thing it is to be dying of ennui."

"Does the Comte know this Monsieur Auguste?"

"Yes; and, strange to say, likes him the best of all Madame's family, although he is a violent democrat, and the very antipodes of his sister's husband in everything."

"But Monsieur Auguste is clever, and would know how to make his way with anybody he thought it worth his while to win."

"He does not, however, seem to make much progress with you, mademoiselle."

"I dislike and distrust him so thoroughly. I

wish with all my heart that the Comte would come back."

Madame received a long letter from her husband nearly every day, but my firm belief was that she never read one half of the closely-written pages, and was only careful to find out when he might be expected to return. At present no definite period could be named, as the dying relative still lingered, and might do so for days or even weeks to come.

Monsieur Auguste had been about a week at the chateau (during which time madame's spirits were extremely fitful and uncertain, alternating from the wildest and most girlish excitement to the deepest gloom), when one evening by starlight I went into the gardens to look for a book the children said they had left under the catalpa tree.

I believed madame and her brother to be

playing at *écarté* in the drawing room, and was consequently much surprised when, on approaching close to the tree, I distinguished both their voices in apparently eager conversation, and guessed, by the trembling of the lady's, that the subject was one of considerable interest.

Under ordinary circumstances, my impulse, the impulse of every honourable person, would have been to retire immediately, but entertaining the suspicions I did of both the parties, I had no scruple in standing for a few minutes on the spot where the loud whispering from beneath the bending branches of the tree had arrested me.

The first intelligible sentence I caught was from madame. She said :

“ It is quite true, Auguste, that I cannot and will not endure much longer the life I have been leading for the last ten years—hope, joy, feeling, spirit, all crushed out of me by one iron hand,

clothed in a silken glove, that is more hateful to me with its soft touches than even the hand itself which it seeks to conceal. It is true also that dark thoughts and fearful temptations have very often lately agitated my tortured mind, and made life a more insupportable burden than it was before; but since you have been here and given these thoughts a name, and become yourself the hitherto invisible tempter—you, Augustine, who are wholly without the excuse of a wasted, aimless, hopeless existence, such as I can at least plead; since then, I repeat, my mind shudders and recoils from what it was learning to contemplate as not so very awful, and now I think I would fain summon my confessor again, receive absolution ere it be too late, and think of some other means of extricating myself from the gilded cage, which is all too close and narrow for my fluttering and impatient wings.”

Auguste laughed, I thought, like a mocking demon, whose agent he doubtless was.

“You have only yourself to please, fair sister, and far be it from me to urge you to the commission of any naughty deeds. You have the always pleasant resource of a convent, or waiting for the natural death of monsieur, which will leave you sole mistress of this charming estate, and a fortune of some hundred thousand francs per annum.”

“I don’t care for the money, Auguste; you know I was never ambitious, like you. All I want and sigh for is my liberty and release from the constant society of a husband I cannot love.”

“Say rather that you hate and loathe like some poisoned air, madame. Be honest, if you cannot be courageous.”

“He has never said an unkind word to me since we retired to this prison, Auguste.”



“And probably never will as long as you breathe and move but at his bidding. No doubt his countship is well pleased with the obedient puppet he has formed.”

The Comtesse sighed heavily.

“I wish I were dead myself, Auguste.”

“Nonsense, Eugénie; that is babbling like a silly child, and I hoped that at least your sufferings had taught you to be a woman. The Chateau Morin may be a dull place, but I should think the purgatory your priests tell you of must be even less lively.”

“Hush, brother. I do not want to hear any of your infidel opinions to-night. I am unhappy, very, and you do nothing to dissipate my gloom.”

“Go indoors then, and send for that English girl to amuse you. I will take a moonlight gallop, and join you all at supper time.”

"I have told you before, Auguste, that the English girl is watching me, and that I have felt sometimes as if she was reading my most secret thoughts. I wish she were safe in her own country again."

"Bah!" replied the charming Auguste, with a whistle of unmistakable contempt, under cover of which I made as quiet and hasty a retreat as my trembling limbs would permit.


My object was not to hear what either of them thought of me, but simply to find out how much necessity there was for the watchfulness of which madame had accused me.

Whether Monsieur Auguste took his moonlight gallop, or remained to cheer his sister's spirits in the garden, I am unable to say, as feeling too thoroughly upset and agitated by what I had heard, I went to my room at once, and sent down my excuses for not appearing again amongst the family that night.

I need scarcely add that I could not sleep, that my mind had received a shock which was scarcely less severe from the previous suspicions I had formed, and which before that long night was over, threatened to render me seriously ill, and to incapacitate me for even the light duties I had daily to perform.

There was something so awful and terrifying in the idea that I had become the possessor of a secret which, I could no longer doubt, involved the very life of the Comte de St. Morin; and yet supposing it possible that I had sufficient courage to make public the conversation I had overheard, what actually criminating evidence would it be? and who would believe the word of an unknown, insignificant foreigner, against that of two persons, allied, at least, to one of the noblest families in France?

Now indeed I would have given worlds had I possessed them, to have been able to confide my



trouble and difficulty to Richard Errol, and obtain his counsel on the occasion. Once I thought I would frame an excuse for going to England immediately, and bring him back with me to avert the catastrophe I shuddered to contemplate—but this was a wild and irrational idea, and calmer reflection convinced me that it was my duty to stay. Madame's professions of repentance might be sincere, and at all events it appeared that I acted as some little check upon her.

But oh! how burdened and miserable I felt when, after that sleepless night, I went down to Madame Boussin and the children in the morning, went down to find them all as merry and joyous as the birds that were singing around them, in the anticipation of a long day's holiday and a drive to a smaller estate of the Comte's where we were all to dine in the English picnic fashion.

"It is," explained Madame Boussin, "because Monsieur Vermont is to leave the Chateau tomorrow, and he wants to see this little property of his brother-in-law's, which indeed I believe was settled on madame at her marriage, but, *pauvre petite!* how frightfully pale you are looking this morning! you have had a bad night."

"Yes, and my head aches in consequence. I shall beg to stay at home."

"Nonsense, you shall do nothing of the kind. The drive and the fresh air (for it is very fresh and lovely this morning), will do you all the good in the world. *Allons un peu de courage.* Breakfast is ordered at ten o'clock, and we start directly after."

"How are we to go?"

"Madame, her brother, and Marguerite in one carriage, and you, myself, and Adeline in

the other. Think how desolate I should be without a companion for nearly twenty miles. I should certainly devour the whole contents of the hampers out of pure ennui."

Seeing that the poor little woman really wished it, and remembering how kind she had always been to me, I thought it would be selfish to indulge my own inclinations on the subject, and perhaps too, when I came to look at it, there was nothing very attractive in the idea of a long day alone in that gloomy house, with such torturing thoughts as mine must necessarily be.

Anyhow I decided on going, and when madame and her brother came into breakfast and remarked on my white cheeks and heavy eyes, I said as calmly as I could, that I doubted not the drive and the change of air would soon dissipate my headache, and make me all right again.

Monsieur Auguste professed himself most unhappy at my indisposition, suggested a dozen different remedies, and even offered to mix me an effervescent draught with his own white and beautifully shaped hand.

I thanked him very much for his sympathy, assured him there was nothing serious in my passing malady, and with unwonted firmness and decision refused his saline draught.

I fancy, under the circumstances, most of my readers would have done the same.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE HUSBAND'S RETURN.

To me it would have been a very heavy, tedious day, had not the excitement of my mind forbade anything of so calm a nature as ennui. As it was, I should have been wretched anywhere, and I did not care whether my burden was 'carried amongst scenes that had become familiar, or those that were entirely new to me.



They all declared it was a charming place we went to, and I have no doubt they were right; but being associated in my mind with those dark thoughts which never left me for a moment, I could discern no beauty in it; and my want of enthusiasm was of course set down to my English coldness and lack of taste.

The children and their French governess enjoyed everything immensely, from their voyages of discovery through the silent and deserted rooms, and up the dark, winding staircases, to the ample cold collation spread out, in the middle of the day, under some acacia trees on the sloping lawn.

I do not know whether Madame and her brother amused themselves equally well, for they walked about the estate together during all the time we had before dinner, and after that meal Madame went to sleep in one of the

least dilapidated rooms, and Monsieur, failing in his attempts to make me the companion of a second ramble, started off through the woods alone, and did not join us again till it was nearly time to return home.

I slept a little on our backward journey, and this moderated the excessive pain in my head, and enabled me to fight with more energy against the dejection which all day had been increasing, and which, if it continued, must in the end excite suspicions of something unusual being the matter.

The next day, to my infinite relief and satisfaction, Monsieur Auguste took his departure, and I was especially glad to observe that his sister and himself did not appear to be on the most friendly terms when they parted.

During this gentleman's visit, Madame had given up her English lessons, and I did not ex-

pect that she would propose re-commencing them, but to my surprise she sent for me about an hour after her brother had left the house, and said if I was at liberty, and well enough, she should like to read with me.

I simply bowed acquiescence and walked to the other end of the room for her books.

"But I am afraid, Mademoiselle," she continued, as I faced her again, "that you are still suffering from your indisposition of yesterday. I hope you have had no bad news from England."

"I have had no letters at all within the last week, Madame, thank you. And I am feeling much better than I did yesterday."

She made no further enquiries, and I gave her the lesson as usual, only that it was not now interrupted by any passing remarks from the Countess, who looked unhappy enough to excite the pity of the least compassionate.



"May I take a book from your library to-day?" I asked, as I was about to leave the room. "I feel sufficiently indolent to go and read in the gardens."

"Certainly, Mademoiselle. They are all at your disposition. Will you choose for yourself?"

I did so.

In the evening we happened to be alone together for some little time in the drawing-room. Madame was writing, and I still reading the book I had borrowed from her shelves in the morning. At length she looked up from her hitherto absorbing occupation (I had taken it into my head that it was a confession for Père Hyppolite) and said:

"You appear greatly interested in your book, Mademoiselle. May I enquire its title?"

My heart certainly beat a little, but I managed to reply with tolerable coolness:

“It is the life of the Marchioness de Brinvilliers, a woman whose wickedness seems to me perfectly inconceivable.”

Never before or since have I seen any countenance of the peculiar and unnatural paleness that overshadowed that of Madame de St. Morin as I spoke. I believe I must have grown white myself, though she would not be thinking of *my* emotion. And yet through it all she fronted me steadily—even when combined with the paleness was an expression of mortal, and I believe superstitious, fear, as if now she had made up her mind that I was endowed with more than human penetration.

I could not have borne the scene long, for I was no heroine, and indeed nothing at heart but a very despicable coward; so after the space of about a minute, during which we had sat looking stonily at each other, I closed my book

abruptly and walked to her side of the large rooms.

“Madame, I fear you are faint. Shall I get you some water?”

“If you please, though it will pass in a minute.”

I took care to be absent two or three, and when I returned the colour had come back to her cheeks, and her lips scarcely touched the water I handed to her.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle, I am better now, and will finish what I am writing, as it is something for my confessor, who will dine here to-morrow.”

I too was better in one sense, for I believed in this unhappy woman's sincerity, but the fear and the agitation were beginning to tell upon my bodily health, and I had to spend the remainder of the evening in my own room alone.

The next day I was too ill to rise in the morning, and when, after having been nursed and fussed by Madame Boussin (who really had one of the kindest hearts in the world, notwithstanding her two ideas) I went down to the late dinner, I found Père Hyppolite as a guest at table, and Madame, looking only a little flushed, paying him all sorts of attention.

I was wonderfully struck then by the sad and deplorable mockery of that religion which gives to an erring man the power of lifting the burden of guilt from a troubled and accusing conscience.

And yet under the circumstances I could not but rejoice in thinking of the confession which had probably been made.

I learned too from Madame herself that Monsieur might be expected at the end of the present week. And though in giving me this informa-

tion, a cloud for a moment passed over her face, she added, with every appearance of sincerity :

“I am very glad he is coming.”

The next few days were occupied in preparations for the master's return.

At length the evening he had named as the time of his appearance at the chateau arrived, and madame said that she would have gone in the carriage to meet him had she been sure that he would have approved of her doing so. I think now it had come to the last, that her feelings were very mixed and contradictory, and that the dread of the old life of restraint and monotony, often prevailed over her impatience to atone for the great wrong she had done.

The children had finished a little drawing each for their father (I had lately volunteered to teach them this accomplishment). Madame Boussin and myself had worked him a pair of



slippers between us, and his wife had netted him a purse of very costly materials.

And so with our respective offerings all ready, we sat waiting hour after hour in the great drawing-room to receive him, and wondering as the time went on what could occasion the delay in his coming.

By eleven o'clock the poor little girls in their elaborately worked muslin frocks, put on in honour of papa, had grown sleepy and cross, and I strongly recommended their being sent to bed. Madame Boussin, who was always drowsy after dinner, soon followed their example, and though I would willingly have stayed to share, if I could not dispel, the growing uneasiness of the Comtesse, she found out that I was tired to death, and insisted on my leaving her about midnight.

I did not intend however to go to bed, so

merely exchanging my dinner toilette for a loose white dressing-gown, the night being oppressively warm, I took a book and trimming my lamp sat down to read by the open window.

Not more I think than half-an-hour had passed in a fruitless attempt to fix my attention on the poem I had selected, when the sound of carriage wheels slowly advancing up the long avenue, made me carry my light to a distant part of the room and watch for the approach of the vehicle.

I heard the hall door open, and saw Madame's white dress gleaming amongst the dark trees as she stood waiting there to welcome her husband, and marvelling no doubt, as I was, at the funereal pace of the advancing carriage.

At length it reached the door, and at the same moment a servant leapt from the box, whispered something to Madame and seemed to be persuading her to return into the house.

Without staying to discover more from my distant post of observation, I ran down as swiftly as I could into the hall, where, by this time two gentlemen, who looked like doctors, had succeeded in carrying the apparently lifeless body of the Comte de St. Morin, whose pale speechless wife, with rigid features, followed close behind.

I learned at length that on his journey home, within thirty miles of it, the Comte had been struck by paralysis, and that although he still breathed, his life was in the most imminent danger.

## CHAPTER III.

## THE COMTE'S CAPRICE.

HE did not die.

The iron constitution had indeed been shaken to its base, and the pride and vigour of a health hitherto untouched were gone for ever. The memory, too, remained considerably impaired; a feverish irritability seemed to have taken the place of that stern hauteur, which, while it bent to none, compelled all to yield more or less to its

dominion; and, in a word, the whole character of this unfortunate man had evidently changed its tone.

What a lesson, could he but have learnt it, for that pride which, throughout his life, had walked hand in hand with him, whispering, no doubt, that all men were mortal but himself!

But strange and deeply suggestive as it was to witness this spectacle of prostrate humanity, still stranger was it to see the untiring devotedness and self-sacrificing patience of the woman who had hitherto hated her husband, and longed even for death as an escape from her life's utter weariness.

Perhaps had she ever loved like other wives, the task before her might have been a less easy one; the heart filled with affection might have sunk down appalled in the contemplation of a wreck so entire, in the presence of sufferings so

incapable of being mitigated. But as it was, she had no sentimentalities to overcome, and there was the strong, irresistible desire of atoning as far as possible for the past, to urge her to the courageous performance of the duties so suddenly devolving upon her.

Yet even taking all this into consideration, I could not help wondering at the extraordinary change that was wrought in the listless, apathetic Comtesse, by that event which filled all the rest of the household with gloom and depression.

It was not now that she wished or anticipated her husband's death, for the least observant might have seen that she was freely sacrificing her own health to soothe and lighten his sickness, and she knew from the doctors who attended him that the dangerous symptoms having passed over, he might exist in his present state for years. Nor was it that her dutiful attentions brought

her any positive reward, for the poor Comte, who was irritable and fractious with all, was doubly irritable with his uncomplaining wife. It could only have been that the necessity for exertion and self-denial awoke the best of her womanly instincts, and dissipated for once and for ever that insupportable *ennui* which had so long been consuming her.

I do not mean to assert that she was insensible to the real and increasing difficulties of her present position, with an invalid husband demanding her constant care and watchfulness, and business affairs to look into, that had never occupied her lightest thought till now; but I do mean to say that all this was infinitely better for her, and produced a far healthier and happier state of feeling than the former torpid and objectless condition.

Poor, simple-hearted Madame Boussin (for

even Frenchwomen can be simple-hearted sometimes), who knew nothing of the under current that had agitated these moving waters, stood forth as one perpetual note of admiration, and dinned into my ears from morning till night her profound conviction that Madame de St. Morin was rapidly qualifying for a saint, and that the church would be wholly reprobate if it refused to canonize her as such when she departed this present life.

I did not venture to advance anything in opposition to this opinion, for besides being quite willing to yield a fair amount of admiration to Madame de St. Morin myself, I had now my own personal anxieties to occupy my mind, and these, I daresay, made me somewhat selfish.

I had not heard from Richard or any of my London friends since Arthur Vincent must have arrived in England, and my busy imagination



suggested a hundred different reasons for this long silence, all of them calculated to distress and torment me, and gaining strength as day after day brought no solution of the mystery.

I had quite determined to leave France as soon as I could hear of another situation; but unless driven to extremity I did not wish to go to England with the idea of becoming a guest for an indefinite period of those too generous friends, who would have sought, I well knew, to keep me altogether with them.

I took occasion, however, while waiting for my letters, to mention to Madame the possibility of my soon returning to my own country.

"I am very sorry," she said, with an earnestness there was no mistaking, "for the children have become attached to you, and they have so little pleasure in life, poor things; besides in our present state of desolation we can ill afford to

lose an agreeable inmate; but it is selfish to talk in this way, for in truth, Mademoiselle, you are looking far from well."

"I am anxious just now for letters from home."

"And these letters, when they come, will decide you?"

"I cannot tell for certain. I should like to hear of another situation before I give up yours."

"You would not take another in France?"

"Oh, no; that is to say, I have a longing to get back to my own country."

Madame sighed, and I thought that perhaps at that moment the picture of her own future life was passing before her.

"I hope you will be happy, Mademoiselle," she observed after a brief silence, "and that if you marry, you will write and tell me of it. I

am not likely to have much variety in my own existence."

"I will not fail to remember your request."

"But indeed, Mademoiselle, the thought of your going troubles me exceedingly. Could I offer you no inducement to stay, at least till the end of the year?"

"The strongest inducement, Madame, would be to oblige you, and perhaps I may not hear of a situation."

"In which case you would remain?"

"If nothing else obliges me to leave."

"Ah, then I will hope still. Adieu, Mademoiselle, I hear my husband's bell, and you know I dare not keep him waiting."

Two days after this, in going suddenly into the dining room, I was surprised to find the Comtesse alone, and crying bitterly.

She looked up on my entrance but said noth-

ing, only the tears seemed coming faster and faster.

"Surely Monsieur is not worse?" I asked hurriedly, "they told me this morning he had passed a good night."

"It is true," she replied, in a tone of deep dejection, "but I think he must be losing his head, the poor man! Just imagine, Mademoiselle, after having throughout my married life, restricted me from all intercourse with my own relations, he now insists on my writing to invite Auguste to come and live with us."

"Is it possible?" I said, and no doubt my looks were expressive.

"I have a thousand reasons for disapproving of it," she continued rather nervously, "but my husband pretends that I do not understand business, and that a steward to look after his estates would be both expensive and troublesome. As

if Auguste knew anything of business, and as if I had not enough on my hands at present without being compelled to watch my brother "

I don't think she intended me to hear this last clause, for it was spoken low and with a concentrated bitterness that perhaps made her for the moment forget she was not alone. Of course I hazarded no reply, and for a little while she sat leaning on the table and weeping silently.

In the meanwhile I decided that the advent of Monsieur Auguste would be ample motive for my leaving the chateau at all risks, and though I should not have had the heart to allude to it during Madame's present distress, I was quite unprepared for her next words:

" At any rate, Mademoiselle, you will not *now* think of deserting me. I know I may trust you so far as to tell you that my brother is a daring, unscrupulous character, and that I shall be

obliged, if he comes, to have my eyes upon him day and night! It is a terrible confession to make; but you will stay and help me in the odious task?"

To say "no" just then would have been cruel in the extreme, for I could so well understand and pity her feelings. I could only plead the non arrival of my letters, and the impossibility of coming to any final decision until they should have been received.

"Oh, if by any means this folly, this madness, could be averted!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands in a kind of helpless despair, "I would bear all else cheerfully and willingly; I *was* bearing it without a murmur—but—but the atonement was not enough. Ah, Mademoiselle, my poor brain!"

"Do try, Madame, to calm yourself; cannot you represent to Monsieur le Comte the unfitness of your brother for the post he would assign him."

"I *have* done so, be sure, in the strongest and most earnest manner, but the more he sees I dislike it the more he insists. Auguste is unfortunately an amusing companion; he can sing, he can relate anecdotes, he can make a complete mountebank of himself when he so pleases, and all this, which would formerly have disgusted my poor husband, he now recurs to as a talent that will amuse his weary hours of sickness."

"What a change!"

"Ah, yes, indeed; but to think of his wanting Auguste!"

It was quite evident that the poor woman could think of nothing else just now. And as it was nearly the time for the messenger to return from town with letters for the chateau, I managed to slip quietly away, and to walk down the avenue to see if he was coming.

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE TRIPLE PACKET.

“Two for you to-day, Mademoiselle, and one such a thick one! Stay, here they are in the middle. Gently! I will pull them out.”

The man was smiling benignantlly as my trembling fingers grasped the precious documents, and my no less trembling lips strove to thank him with the calmness on which I prided myself.



Of course he had sufficient intelligence to read me through and through. But I cared very little about this, as I bore my long looked for treasures to a shady spot under the leafiest tree, and heard him, as he went on his way to the chateau, whistling softly and sentimentally :  
“ *D’où viens-tu beau nuage?*”

The thick letter, being in a handwriting which, although familiar, I could not in my excitement identify, I opened that one first, notwithstanding the fact that the other, written on thin blue paper, and sealed with the initials R. E., promised to be the most interesting of the two.

Let the reader judge how far this promise was fulfilled when both the epistles, beginning with that in the strange handwriting, are placed before him :—

“ Lismore Vicarage,

“ August 13th, 18—.

“ MY DEAR MISS HEATHCOTT,

“ Seven months have now elapsed since the day on which you said farewell to a poor sick man, who felt that in losing you he was losing all, except duty, that could make life endurable. For a long, long time it was my comfort to remember that the emotion I experienced on that occasion was not wholly unshared by you. I did not flatter myself with the belief that you regarded me otherwise than as a friend, but I thought that in the corner of your kind heart, where this friendship was cherished, there *might* be room for a softer, tenderer feeling, which absence would perchance develop. I have abstained from writing during these long seven months; I have denied myself even the gratification of sending you a message; I have left you free from

all importunity because my hope has been strong, that *without* external influences your heart in the end would turn to him who has given you all his own. This line of conduct I should still have pursued had I not heard from your friend in London that you are unhappy in your present position, and seeking to be delivered from it. Once more therefore I offer you a home and a life of quiet usefulness such as I am sure you are learning to desire and appreciate. I will not for a moment doubt your acquiescence this time in my wishes, not because I am vain enough to imagine myself irresistible, or even attractive, but because I have never wavered from my first strong impression that it is the destiny marked out for you. We will labour together in that Great Cause which I, at least, in spite of my assumed vocation, have too much neglected during the lamented past. We will cheer each

other amidst the inevitable trials of the wilderness; we will speak together of that dear and sainted one who first taught me to discern excellence in you, and who wished of all things that you might gladden the home she left so desolate.

“Neither shall we be entirely without the companionship of kindred spirits even in this secluded village, for my admirable curate is engaged to be married to Jane Errol, who, with Richard, is spending a few days at the Vicarage, and Mr. Errol is building a house for them close to ours.

“I need only add that I shall at once commence every necessary preparation for your reception. The old Vicarage shall at least put on a smiling face and a holiday dress to greet its new mistress. Your friends in London will claim you first, but I will meet you at Dover on

your landing, and take charge of you to their house at Highgate. Only let me know what day and hour you will arrive. Poor Mrs. Allen entreats permission to add a line; she is a faithful servant, and would not be excluded from my confidence.

“With every sentiment of esteem and affection,

“I am, my dear Miss Heathcott,

“Yours always,

“PHILIP SEYMOUR.”

The few lines added by Mrs. Allen were as follows:

“I hope, my very dear young lady, you will excuse the great liberty I am taking in sending you a few lines in master’s letter. I knew he was writing to you, and guessing what it was about, asked him the question point blank, and although he said I was very bold, I don’t think

he was particularly angry when I told him how much I wished your reply would be favourable, and how pleased I should be to get everything nice and comfortable for you. My dear young lady, we have talked of you, master and me, hundreds of times since you left us, and wished you safe back from foreign parts, where I don't believe you can be as happy as in your own peaceful country. Master has been quite well ever since the fever, and works harder than ever, only now he goes about more amongst the poor people, and stays less in his study. My dear young lady, I am going to have all the parlour furniture cleaned next week, and the carpet taken up, and master does talk of having a small summer room built on the left side of the house, which will open into the garden, and be lighter and more cheerful than any of our present apartments.

“With my best respects, my dear young lady,  
and hoping soon to hear the Lismore bells ringing merrily,

“I remain,

“Your obedient servant and friend,

“REBECCA ALLEN.”

And now for Richard's:

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“You have doubtless been wondering why your last letter has remained so long unanswered. The simple truth is that after Arthur Vincent's report concerning you, we were all anxious to devise some plan for getting you back to England immediately, and believing that you would still refuse the home always open to you, my mother has been indefatigable in her exertions to hear of a suitable situation. Our object has been to find a really pious family, where

you would not only have congenial companionship, but be treated as a daughter and a friend. Hitherto our efforts have met with no success, and now for awhile they will be suspended, in consequence of that alternative offered to you in the letter accompanying this, and concerning which I am now going to venture to say a few words to you.

“During my later correspondence with our dear Effie, she mentioned to me the fact of Mr. Seymour’s attachment to you, and with a natural desire to secure her father’s happiness, entreated me, should an opportunity ever occur, to promote his wishes to the extent of my ability, always supposing that I conscientiously believed *your* happiness, too, would be increased thereby.

“Now of course this is a question concerning which I must at present remain in doubt, and therefore I can only say—looking at the pro-



posal made to you in the abstract—that I consider Mr. Seymour worthy of all esteem, and well qualified to be the guide, protector, and friend of the woman (supposing it any woman) to whom his affections are given.

“If, therefore, your heart is free, and you have no personal dislike to Effie’s father, I would have you weigh the subject well before you decide on rejecting him. A christian husband, a moderate competence, a quiet country home, are advantages which many of the best and most attractive of your sex are unable to command—and the chances of your being ever really happy amongst strangers are so few, that as you *will not* join *our* family circle, it seems as if the present alternative were truly a providential opening in your favour. I must, however, say no more, or my conscience might hereafter accuse me of having exerted undue influence.

“Jenny, whose happy prospects Mr. Seymour tells me he has mentioned to you, unites with me in every kind and affectionate wish, and bids me add she shall find it hard to forgive you if you refuse to become her neighbour and fellow worker at Lismore.

“Begging one line from you to say you pardon my presumption,

“I am, my dear friend and sister,

“Yours truly and faithfully,

“RICHARD ERROL.”

My heart had long been sick with hope deferred, but now that the desire had come, was it as a tree of life?

Reader, what do you think?

## CHAPTER V.

## DESTINY.

“A CHRISTIAN husband, a moderate competence, a quiet country home!”

Thus Richard had classed the advantages he wished to parade before me, and even without his earnest recommendation, I hope I should not have been insensible to their value.

To say that I was not startled, upset, almost paralyzed by the contents of my three letters,

would be to utter a glaring untruth, and yet when the first shock had passed away, there came a calmness and a quietness over my spirit such as I marvelled at myself.

Had Richard been mute on the subject, I can well imagine that for days and days my mind would have been tossed about and agitated by a hundred doubts, and difficulties, and indecisions. I am nearly sure that Mr. Seymour's letter alone, unbacked by any other influence, would have made me reluctant to reject the destiny once more and so frankly and earnestly offered to me—particularly as the coming of Madame's brother to the Chateau disposed me to welcome any excuse for getting away—but my want of love for Mr. Seymour (such love as I was young enough to desire to feel as well as to excite) and many other reasons which I do not choose to talk about, would have raised a con-

flict in my soul, and kept me on the rack for I know not how long, had not Richard uttered his thoughts and settled it all at once.

I had acquired the habit—perhaps it was a foolish, womanly one—of looking up to him as a kind of oracle, and I believe I felt a strange sort of gratification in yielding my own will so immediately to even his implied wishes.

Let me say, however, in justice to myself, that I did not for a moment doubt that I was acting rightly and wisely in resolving to accept Mr. Seymour. I had something more than a common regard for him; he came as often into my thoughts as any of my friends in England, and always invested with a halo of particular interest, which I attributed to the warm regard he had manifested towards me. I never could endure to picture his lonely fireside; occasionally self-reproach mingled with my reflections con-

cerning that episode of my life in which he had played so conspicuous a part; and, in short, if any of my female readers can understand what it is to esteem a man so much as to be *all but* in love with him, they will know exactly the sort of feeling I had for Mr. Seymour, and perhaps not consider me much to be pitied in the destiny that was before me.

And then, too, I must acknowledge that, mingling with it all, was a little bit of curious superstition, a recurrence to Mr. Seymour's professed convictions that I was to be his wife, notwithstanding my first decided refusal, and even to Madame de St. Morin's half-laughing prediction to the same effect, when I had spoken to her on the subject.

This helped to produce a quiet, if not altogether satisfied, settling down to the apparently inevitable necessity I at length recognised; and

although I suffered two days to elapse before I answered either of my letters, my mind was as completely made up an hour after I had read them, as it was when I took pen and paper to seal with calm decision my earthly fate for ever.

To Mr. Seymour I wrote fully, candidly, and I hope gratefully, for I owed him gratitude at the very least. To Richard I only said:

“I acquit you entirely of presumption in the kind and brotherly counsel you have given me. I thank you for this as well as for all the other proofs of interest in my welfare which you have ever manifested, and I wish you to believe that in deciding to accept the destiny offered to me, I am not uninfluenced by the remembrance of my obligations to yourself, and to that dear child who first made life enjoyable to me. Be assured, however, that neither my judgment nor con-

science disapprove the step I have taken, and that I hope the coming years will justify it even more fully. It will certainly be my pleasure as well as my duty to endeavour by every means in my power to promote the comfort and happiness of the generous-hearted man who has esteemed me worthy of being his wife."

And now, when all this was done, came the task of communicating to Madame la Comtesse my intention of leaving her. She had asked me the day my letters arrived what hope for her they contained, and I had replied vaguely that I could tell her nothing as yet, because in truth I lacked the courage to distress her still further, while she was in the first excitement of her annoyance at the thought of her brother's becoming an inmate of the chateau.

But my answers once despatched, I felt I had no longer any right to keep her in suspense, and



availing myself of a moment when, escaping from her husband's room, she went to take a turn in the gardens, I quickly joined her and briefly told my tale.

"Then you love this gentleman, after all!" she exclaimed, when I had finished, and was dreading her remonstrances at my having so abruptly decided on quitting France. "Assuredly you English are very droll."

"Why droll, Madame?"

"Because a few weeks ago you declared you should never, never marry him, that you wished he would choose another wife, that you had no love at all for him; and now he writes to tell you only what you knew perfectly well before, and you resolve at once to accept his proposals without even taking one little week to consider. Is it not droll, this? I ask you, mademoiselle?"

"It appears inconsistent, certainly; but I believe I am acting wisely. My best friend, and one on whose judgment I have implicit reliance, evidently regards it as a fortunate destiny marked out for me. You know, Madame, you yourself prophesied that I should marry Mr. Seymour."

"So I did; but that was before I had heard anything of the correspondent. Forgive me, Mademoiselle, for I am speaking now as a friend, but it strikes me that for once you have acted precipitately."

"I do not think so. I am quite satisfied."

"Then I will not add another word, except that I sincerely wish you a happy future. As for myself, I am truly sorry to lose you—more sorry than you would perhaps believe—but it is just that I should bear my punishment alone; it was not half severe enough."

These last observations did not seem to be

addressed to me, so I made no reply to them, and presently my companion roused herself and asked me how soon I should have to go.

"I have fixed the beginning of next month, Madame. I thought that would give you time to find another English governess, should you desire to replace me."

"Thank you, but I believe I shall content myself with Madame Boussin for the present. When once Auguste is settled here, it is very sure that he will be the master."

Poor woman. It needed not the trembling tone in which she spoke to remind me of how much would be involved in this mastership.

The brother's answer, however, to the invitation sent to him, did not immediately arrive. Probably it would not have suited Monsieur Auguste's temper or dignity to have appeared too anxious to accept the Comte's tardy over-

tures. But during these few intervening days there was profound quiet and monotony in the outer life at the chateau, and I had time to think! To think of the strange and unexpected turn the current of my life seemed to have taken, and to accustom myself to the contemplation of its novel aspect.

The more my mind dwelt on it, the more satisfied did I feel that all was right and wisely ordered. I had never coveted a brilliant destiny for myself, and since Effie's death I had been convinced that the great point was not to live happily, but to live well. As Mr. Seymour's wife I should possess many advantages that my position had never entitled me to expect, and have abundant opportunities for improving the few talents with which I was endowed. The old Vicarage, too, with its ivied walls and shadowy corners, painted itself with a pleasing

effect on my imagination. I had quite a longing to see it once more bathed in a subdued autumn sunshine, and forming as it always did a picturesque contrast to the white cottages and yellow corn fields that were dotted around.

It was agreeable, too, to think that I should be welcomed in my own country with no cold or formal welcome; that I had really the power of conferring happiness on one good and noble heart which had been true to me through all my indifference and neglect. Nor did I esteem lightly the prospect of having Jane Errol and her husband as our neighbours and friends. We should form a little social company of kindred spirits, endeavour to improve and exalt ourselves and each other, and live quietly and contentedly apart from the restless world.

Such was my mental picture of the coming future; and who will say it was not a pleasant one?

And yet—and yet there were moments—rare ones it is true—wherein all the soft moonshine of this tranquil scene faded from my sight, and I caught myself looking upwards with tearful eyes towards a distant star which shone with a far purer and deeper lustre—but shone not, and would never shine for me.

So be it, then. And henceforth, weak heart, grow strong, and accept with thankfulness the quiet moonbeams that will fall mildly and cheeringly across thy path of life.

## CHAPTER VI.

## GOING HOME.

WHEN Monsieur Auguste wrote at length to accept his brother-in-law's invitation, he made quite a favour of it, but arrived nevertheless two days after his letter.

From the very moment he entered the house, I could almost fancy I saw the iron weight descending which little by little was to crush his unfortunate sister to the earth.

I believed him to be in many respects an un-

scrupulous and wicked man, but there was a weakness and palpable cowardice in his character which convinced me he would never make himself amenable to the laws of his country by any actual crime. It might answer his purpose to keep the poor Comtesse always on the rack, for by this means he could do what he liked with her; but I am persuaded that he did not at that time contemplate a greater wrong than winding himself into the favour of his half demented brother-in-law, and inducing him to give him the uncontrolled management of all his financial affairs, and perhaps bequeath the larger portion of his estates to him at his death.

Had the Comtesse been perfectly open with me, I should have striven to convince her of this, but she only spoke in hints and inuendoes, and even then seemed always afraid of having said too much.



The sick husband was not long in finding out that Monsieur Auguste was as necessary to him as the air he breathed, and if Madame could have been satisfied to leave them together, her brother's presence might have been a real boon, by procuring for her that rest and relaxation which every attendant upon the sick so imperatively requires. But I saw that she had set herself, from the very first, the hard task of the most incessant and untiring watchfulness, and that this strain upon the mind and body was fast injuring if not destroying both.

Truly her "sin had found her out!" and she was experiencing (I could scarcely hope learning yet), that not only the commission, but the very thought of evil is abomination unto the Lord.

But time was hastening on, and in the midst of my preparations for departure I could only

pause occasionally to watch the tragedy enacting around me, and to pity at least two of the actors in it with all my heart.

Of course during this period I was not without my home correspondence, and had anything been wanting to calm and settle my mind, I should have found it in the kind letters of gratified affection, and the friendly ones of warm congratulation that I was now constantly receiving. It was still understood that Mr. Seymour was to meet me at Dover, and that I should be escorted by him to my friends' house at Highgate, where we were both to stay together until the marriage took place.

The last few days of my sojourn at the chateau, Madame la Comtesse loaded me with presents and expressions of attachment which I had no reason then to think insincere. I believe, poor woman! she clung to me as the only person to

whom it was ever possible for her to speak of her troubles and anxieties, for I cannot fancy that even to Père Hyppolite she would compromise her worthless brother.

Madame Boussin and the children were also anxious in every way to testify their regret at my leaving them, and on the last day of all Monsieur le Comte sent for me to his room, and after complimenting me at some length on the manner in which I had discharged my duties in his household, presented me with an elegant and costly bracelet, which he begged me to wear on my wedding morning in remembrance of the giver. Monsieur Auguste, who was sitting by with his cynical smile, added that although he did not dare, being an unmarried man, to offer me a keepsake, he hoped he should retain a place in my memory, when cruel destiny had separated us for ever.

Knowing how to appreciate this impertinence, I looked at him steadily, and told him that he certainly would. He bowed low, as if highly flattered by my answer, but being quite my match in quickness of perception, I remained in no doubt of being understood.

The only present I ventured myself to make (with the exception of a few simple religious books to the children) was an English Protestant Bible to Madame la Comtesse, and this she seemed to receive with pleasure, assuring me that she would read it when I was gone, and endeavour to find in its pages the comfort I told her they were capable of bestowing.

I bade her farewell at length with real emotion, for I saw nothing but a life of continual trial before her, hopeless in its present suffering, and still more hopeless in its end, should not the

grace of God be revealed in her heart, leading her to the only propitiation for the sins which were receiving now their inevitable earthly retribution.

Not less fervent and energetic than our prayers and activities for the conversion of the far off heathen, should be our prayers and efforts for the enlightenment of the unhappy Romanists, who everywhere surround us, a people who come so near the truth that we stand and wonder that they cannot grasp it, a people who give the crucified Saviour a prominent place everywhere except in their hearts—who bow down in seeming adoration before a wooden crucifix, but never recognize the necessity of following him who hung upon it for man's offences; a people who have, in a word, all the shadows beautifully and skillfully mellowed down, of the one true faith, but

who have missed the substance, and are therefore groping in the dark like blind men who still believe they can see the light.

\* \* \* \*

The sun, which had been shining gloriously over land and sea when I embarked in the steam packet at Calais, became shrouded in a mist of grey clouds some time before the white cliffs of Dover were in sight.

I had remained on deck during the first hour of the short voyage, amusing myself by watching the changing forms and colours of the waves as we got farther and farther from the land, and trying to picture the meeting that awaited me on the opposite coast. But the increasing roll of the vessel at length obliged me reluctantly to follow the example of most of the ladies on

board, and seek refuge in the hot and crowded cabin below.

The feeling of illness subsided when I had placed myself in a horizontal posture on one of the hard couches, and I had nothing more serious to contend with than the heat, and the occasionally audible sufferings of those around me. Certainly these were unpleasant enough, but they did not much interfere with the activity of my thoughts, or assist in subduing the excessive nervousness, that I felt increasing with every mile that lessened the distance between me and England.

It was one thing to contemplate my future destiny when hundreds of miles separated me from him who was to preside over it, and quite another thing, as I discovered now, to look at it in the immediate anticipation of meeting my future husband.

It is true that I was still fully persuaded of

the many advantages which I had agreed to accept—that I was still fully satisfied of my perfect esteem for Mr. Seymour; but in spite of all this, the idea of receiving him as a lover, now that the eleventh hour had arrived, filled me with a strange trembling and uneasiness. I wondered whether his outward manner would be cold and repelling, as on the first occasion of my introduction to him, or whether he would show me at once that he meant to take advantage of our changed position towards each other, and treat me openly as his affianced wife. Finally, I wondered whether he would look like Effie, and whether this resemblance, if it struck me forcibly, would have the effect of drawing my heart nearer to his.

In the midst of these reflections, one of my fellow passengers who had gone up on deck, came down and said that the Dover cliffs were clearly



visible, and that we should be in in less than half an hour.

At this simple announcement my heart began beating so violently that I was literally obliged to have recourse to a few drops of sal volatile that I had brought with me in case of sea sickness, and a lady who was just beginning to make her toilette beside me, asked if I was ill again, and offered me her smelling bottle.

I began at length seriously to take myself to task for my folly, and hoping to get the better of it I rose from the hard couch, and with only my travelling hood on my head, went up to breathe the cooler and purer air of the deck.

How or why it was I cannot tell, any more than I can account for the childish nervousness I have just attempted to describe, but the very

moment my eyes rested upon the English coast, upon the shores of my own dear country, every particle of nervousness vanished as if by magic, and I felt a quiet, tranquil happiness stealing over my spirit, and lulling all my anxieties and apprehensions to rest.

This lasted until our vessel was near enough to its place of landing to enable those on board to distinguish their friends and acquaintances, who were waiting for them on the pier. Then, without examining very minutely amongst the crowd, I made a hasty retreat to the cabin again, and began to be excessively busy with my packages and carpet bag.

One by one all the ladies dressed themselves and went with smiling faces on deck, and I was glad to be alone for these few minutes, whose flight I would willingly have delayed. When the stewardess came in and told me I must make

haste, for that we were arrived, and everybody was landing, the distressing trembling assailed me once more, and I assured her the key of my carpet bag would *not* turn in its lock.

At the same instant, to my great relief, she was called up-stairs, and then I sat down and proceeded with my work leisurely, determined to regain composure before I left the ship.

The tiresome bag was at length secured, and I had just taken my bonnet in my hand when a footstep that was not that of the fat stewardess, nor could be any of my late companions, sounded on the cabin stairs, and increased the circulation of my blood in quite an alarming manner.

"Courage," I said to myself, pinching my arm severely in the most sensitive part by way of a tonic, "it will all be over in a minute."

The cabin door, which I had closed after the

stewardess, opened softly. I raised my head bravely, considering all I felt, and uttered an exclamation of startled astonishment when I recognised in the intruder—not my future husband, but Richard Errol, junior!

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE MEETING AT DOVER.

MY first words, on recovering a little from the surprise his sudden appearance had excited, were intended to express the pleasure I felt at seeing him once more (and some hours, too, before I had anticipated doing so), but even while I spoke I was struck with the singular and changeless gravity of his countenance,\* and breaking off abruptly from what I had been saying while he

shook hands with me, I asked rather anxiously if anything was the matter.

In the meantime I was tying my bonnet strings with fingers that were too unsteady to enable me to accomplish the task very rapidly.

"There is no hurry," Richard said at length, and then I knew by his voice that something *was* the matter; "I have spoken to the stewardess, and she will not disturb us immediately. Sit down, and never mind your bonnet."

I took it off again, for the heat seemed choking me, and continued looking at my companion enquiringly.

"I know," he added, "that you have a strong mind, and perhaps some uncommon powers of endurance, but I could wish that any other than myself had been chosen for the painful task now before me. My father was to have come, but he was hindered at the last moment. I have little

skill in breaking evil tidings, or softening their effect, and, Dora, my poor girl, my dear sister (here he took one of my trembling hands), I am the bearer of very evil tidings to you. Are you prepared to hear them?"

"Yes, do not keep me in suspense; that is worse than all."

He shuddered visibly as, in answer to my entreaty, he said in a low, agitated voice:

"Three days ago Mr. Seymour complained of slight indisposition, but refused to have medical advice; towards evening he became worse, and Mrs. Allen telegraphed for me to go to him. I lost no time, and happily arrived an hour or two before the fatal symptoms came on. Everything that human skill suggested was done for his relief, but all proved insufficient, and at seven o'clock in the morning he died in my arms—died, confessing Jesus as his only hope of salva-

tion, and lamenting only that he had been for such a brief period in His service."

I believe that utter bewilderment and a feeling that I must be in a dream numbed, for the moment, the excessive pain this startling intelligence was calculated to produce. I remember a sensation of sudden sickness coming over me, which I suppose drove all colour from my face, for I was conscious of Richard's arm supporting me while he entreated me to drink some of the water he found in a glass on the cabin table. But I knew I was in no danger of fainting, and my only present struggle was to clear and disentangle the thoughts and ideas which seemed to have fallen into some strange disorder in my brain.

I believe during most of the time that we remained in the cabin, Richard was speaking to me, and endeavouring to give me courage under



the calamity he had been forced to announce; but although I had a vague impression of hearing him talk of the mysterious decrees of Omnipotence, and the absolute necessity of submitting patiently to a Father's will, I was quite unable at the time even to connect his words, much less to profit by them.

The first thing that roused me from this unnatural and distressing state was the abrupt entrance of the stewardess, with the information that she had left us to the last possible moment, that all the luggage was out of the ship, and that we must perforce go on shore.

"Are you well enough, Dora?" said Rickard, with a look of tender pity that immediately brought burning tears to my eyes, and assisted in dispersing the mist which had gathered over my brain.

"Oh yes," I replied, "I am better now."

Then we left the vessel without exchanging another word, and drove immediately to one of the quietest hotels in the town, where the landlady (to whom Richard had previously spoken), took me very kindly into her own room, and begged me to lie down and have a cup of tea, while my friend went to see about my luggage.

I was very glad of the tea, for an acute headache, accompanied by parching thirst, had succeeded my first excitement, and I felt an urgent need of having my nerves quieted before undertaking any further exertion.

The good natured landlady left me alone for a quarter of an hour while she prepared the tea, and for this I was especially grateful, as it enabled me to recover (though by slow degrees) from my stupor, and to look my present position calmly in the face.

*Mr. Seymour was dead!* I required to re-

peat that fact constantly, and even in an audible whisper to myself, or I should still have failed in my efforts to realize it. The man who had distinguished me by his warm esteem, with whom I had voluntarily consented to pass my life, who one short hour ago I had been expecting with nervous tremblings to meet as a living wooer, was no longer an inhabitant of the same world, was dead to all earthly love and feeling, and ready to be laid in the grave beside his daughter!

It was indeed a mysterious dispensation, and one that might well have startled out of their composure far stronger nerves than mine. Had I loved this man ever so fondly and passionately, although the after grief would have been more intense, the first shock could not possibly have been greater.

It was as if a barrier of ice, unthought of, un-

expected, had suddenly arisen between me and a calmly smiling landscape on which I had begun to gaze with pleasure. And then, rising above all other sensations, was a profound wonderment at the dispensation itself as occurring at such a time, and so completely upsetting my theory, as well as that of the dead man, concerning the pre-arranged destiny that was to unite us whether we would or no. How vain and presumptuous seemed this idea to me now, when death had interposed and said to one, "I claim you for my own;" and to the other, "walk on as hitherto through the world alone."

And never had solitude worn so chill and sad an aspect as it did in my present contemplation of it. I had accustomed myself to the thought of making the happiness of one fireside, and of receiving back at least a part of what I conferred. My mind had drawn sunny pictures of the life

at Lismore, and the old Vicarage had grown into a familiar and cherished home. Where now would be my home? and what would be my life?

Out on the wide, bleak world again, and an existence amongst strangers, against whom—even in the unknown, shadowy forms they took in my dreary lookings into the future—my rebellious heart closed instinctively.

This, and only this, was what I had to expect.

But copious tears came at last to relieve the long oppression under which I had been labouring, and these, with the excellent tea the landlady brought, gave me strength to sit up and meet Richard on his return, with a quietness that evidently astonished him.

The train would leave, he told me, in half an hour, but if I preferred remaining here till the

evening, there would be another which would still enable us to reach London before midnight.

I assured him I should infinitely prefer starting at once, and as this was evidently his own wish also, the luggage was sent on at my request, and we walked slowly to the station.

Richard doubtless remembered, as I did, our last walk together to the Lismore station, when he was just in his first deep grief at Effie's death, and I was longing above all things else for the power to comfort him.

Now our positions were reversed, only that I knew more of his heart and its sufferings then, than he knew of mine at present.

He alluded, however, to that time, and asked me if I had forgotten his extreme desolation.

I said I had not forgotten it nor anything in connection with the past—that during the whole

of my stay in France I had lived almost entirely upon memory, or at least drawn from this source every sensation of happiness that I had known.

“ But this is not a healthy life, Dora,” he said very gently and soothingly, “ I think the true christian should always endeavour to extract the amount of happiness he is fairly entitled to from the present, leaving the past to fade gradually and imperceptibly into the distance, and having nothing to do with the future, excepting that portion of it that lies beyond the grave.”

“ But when the past contains all that has been bright and joyous in our lives, and the present is dull and cheerless as a winter’s day?”

“ Even then this looking back is not a healthy occupation. It only increases a thousandfold the dullness and cheerlessness of which we complain.”

"Do *you* never look back and loathe the present from its contrast with the past?"

"I do indeed look back sometimes, when my heart is weak and cowardly, but I have suffered so much from my folly, besides missing opportunities of gathering so many pleasant flowers by the wayside, that now I always try to remember Lot's wife, and to go forward at any sacrifice."

"Existence was wearing a very melancholy aspect for you when we parted eight months ago. Have you succeeded in restoring its brightness?"

"Not its brightness, perhaps, but certainly its serenity. And what I have done, Dora, and more than this, you may and will do also."

"But after repeated disappointments the heart loses its trust in the future. At least you must agree to this."



"I do entirely; nay, more, I believe that this is one of the objects of our frequent trials. We are to live and act in the present, enjoy, if it is possible to do so, and not to be ever looking forward and expecting that earth has greener and pleasanter resting places than any we have hitherto encountered."

"But what strength and wisdom we need for all this! What instincts must be crushed and long habits of thought laid aside before we can attain unto it!"

"Truly; but no one sets out on a difficult pilgrimage without well considering the dangers and impediments he will meet with on the road. You, Dora, are not one to lie down in despair before a little hillock, or give up all for lost, because a narrow streamlet has to be forded."

"But the little hillock to you, might be a steep and rugged mountain to me, and the

narrow streamlet a raging torrent; we are not all constituted alike."

"No; but we have all the same rod, and the same staff to lean upon, and you are sure that these can help you over the roughest mountains and through the wildest torrents."

We had reached the station now, and our conversation was necessarily suspended, but it had changed in a great measure the current of my thoughts, which, if they were not enlivened, were at least restrained in their murmuring and rebellion.

The compartment in which we took our seats being filled with talkative passengers, we both chose to remain silent during the three hours journey, and on arriving in London we found Mr. Errol and Catherine waiting with a carriage, to conduct me at once to their house at Highgate.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## MY MASTER.

No stricken deer, torn and bleeding from recent wounds, could have found a more kindly shelter than I found amongst my friends at Highgate, or have been soothed and tended with more love and gentleness than they bestowed freely and with all their hearts upon me.

They never asked me to what extent I had been attached to the man whose sudden death altered

all my worldly prospects, and left me again alone as to human ties; they never sought to dissect my grief, or to lay upon it the unhallowed finger of a vain curiosity. They had every evidence of its being real, and nothing more was needed to insure me their warmest sympathy, and their most delicate consideration.

Richard and his father were both absent during the first few days of my visit, and although nobody told me a syllable about it, I felt sure they had gone to the funeral at Lismore. On the afternoon of their return Mr. Errol asked me to accompany him to the library for half an hour, as he had something to say to me.

"Sit down, my dear," he began, when the door had closed us in, "and don't look so frightened and nervous. I have no more bad news to communicate, though I cannot expect

you just yet to feel elated at what most people would consider good news. It is, however, just this. Our poor friend, as perhaps you know, had a small private fortune, independent of his rectorship; it was not much, something less than a hundred and fifty pounds a year, but such as it was he has left it (with the exception of a liberal annuity to his old housekeeper) to you, making me the very willing trustee of this little property for you."

My heart was too full for anything else, and so without uttering a word I burst into tears.

Mr. Errol allowed me to cry as long as I felt disposed; he did not seem to think it in the least childish or unnatural, but when I grew calm again, he came and kissed me very kindly, and said he hoped now that I should feel no scruple in remaining altogether with his family. By and bye they would be losing Jane, and they

would all be woefully disappointed if I refused to take her place.

"I will not refuse," I replied, on the impulse of the moment. "Where else could I be so happy as here?"

"Then it is settled, and I may tell my wife that she has a new daughter, and the girls that they have a new sister. It will make them very glad."

"But there must be certain conditions still, Mr. Errol. Forgive me if I cling too obstinately to my independence."


He smiled a little.

"Certainly, my dear. Mrs. Errol shall bring you in a weekly bill for the mutton and pudding you consume daily. Have no fears on that head. Do not I hold your money in my own hands?"

I ought to have taken more time to deliberate

before accepting definitively Mr. Errol's proposal of my residing entirely with them; but it was done now, and the gladness testified by every member of the family might well have reconciled me to a far less agreeable prospect.

For days and days, however, after hearing of Mr. Seymour's bequest, I could think of nothing but the considerate generosity of the man whose affection I had so long slighted and so tardily repaid. Now I felt I would joyfully have sacrificed many years of my life to have had the power of recalling his, and devoting myself to the task of rendering him happy. True, I felt assured that he was infinitely happier in his home above, but I fretted over the remembrance of the coldness I had manifested towards him, and the blind stupidity which had hindered me from appreciating and loving him as he deserved.



Instead, therefore, of recovering from my depression, I began from this time to get worse and worse, and even Richard's grave looks of disapproval (for he was always faithful to me) only had the effect of making me feel my vast inferiority to him in every respect, and deducing from this the inference that he despised me as I knew I deserved to be despised.

One evening when I was walking with Isabel in the garden, he came out to us, and told his sister she might go into the house, as he wanted a few minutes' conversation with me alone.

I was quite prepared for a lecture, and I got it, though in milder terms than I had expected.

"If," he said in conclusion, "you really feel that you cannot conquer this dejection, after deliberately making up your mind that the indul-



gence of it is weakening both to your health and character, then I should strongly advise your going out into the world again, where the necessity for exertion will leave you little time for dwelling vainly upon the past "

"I am quite ready to go," I said, though the thought that he could thus calmly recommend it, was not a very agreeable one.

"Then you refuse to make any further efforts where you are."

"I refuse nothing, I only feel weak and stupid, and altogether unworthy of exciting your most casual interest. But I am not ungrateful, and I will do whatever you suggest and advise."

"You will be my obedient pupil in short, as long as I set you no dull or difficult tasks to learn."

"I will be your pupil unconditionally. I have no fear of your proving a hard master."

"I make no promises, Dora, except that I will never suffer you to sleep at the foot of a hillock, or to turn back at the sight of a narrow brook."

"Very well. And now what is my first lesson?"

"This—'Redeeming the time because the days are evil.'"

"But how? I must have more definite instructions."

"Open your Bible and they will pour in upon you. I do not intend to usurp the place of the Great Teacher, whom I trust you revere even as I do. My part can only be that which the apostle assigned to all faithful believers when he said, 'Exhort ye one another daily, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.' Now, Dora, I have done."

"Thank you."

"Nay, I merit no thanks as yet. Tell me what you think of Isabel."

"She is certainly sadly altered from what she was a year ago, but I fancy her spirits have become more equal, and she evidently enjoys this new home as much as the rest of you."

"But her health is not good. She seems getting thinner and paler every day; I wish we could send her somewhere for a total change."

"When Jane is married she will go to Lis-more."

"But that will not be until the spring. This reminds me, however, that I have some news for you that will certainly give you pleasure. Mrs. Allen, who is you know, to live with my sister by and bye, has consented to come and spend a few days with us on her way to some relatives the other side of London. She is very anxious to see you again."

“ Poor dear old lady. I shall indeed be glad to shake hands with her ; she has doubtless fretted a good deal.”

“ I fear so, but you must do your best to comfort her while she is here. This will be a very easy and pleasant little lesson.”


“ When do you expect her?”

“ To-morrow or the next day. But here come Catherine and Jenny to look after you, and I had forgotten to mention to my mother that Vincent has promised to spend an hour with us this evening.”

## CHAPTER IX.

## OUR PRISONERS.

ISABEL had only seen Mr. Vincent once since his return from the continent, and then, as Catherine told me, she had betrayed very little agitation, and studiously kept in the back ground during the whole time of his visit. It might have been the same on the present occasion, had not her altered appearance chanced to attract the young doctor's attention, and led him to bestow, per-



haps a professional, but anyhow a marked notice upon her, which had the effect of bringing back all her bright colour, and a part at least of that animation which we had missed so long.

They talked together for a considerable period, and I believe he was describing to her some of the places he had visited abroad, for I heard her say, with a sudden kindling of her old enthusiasm:

“Oh! how I should like to travel!”

And then he seemed to grow thoughtful for a little while, and soon after Richard and himself were in earnest conversation in a distant part of the room.

The next day Catherine told me that Mr. Vincent had strongly recommended immediate change of air and scene for Isabel; that they feared he thought her on the verge of consumption, and were therefore disposed to attend to a

suggestion he had made that she should join his mother at Nice for the winter. The young lady who had hitherto resided with Mrs. Vincent was on the point of marriage, and Arthur felt convinced that his mother would be only too glad to receive as a guest the sister of his most intimate friend.

"And what does Isabel herself say to it?" I asked.

"Not much, but I think the idea pleases her nevertheless. Mr. Vincent is to come again tomorrow to learn our decision."

"Poor Bella! it will be a long way for her to go from home alone."

"She would not, of course, travel alone. I believe papa himself would take her, but we all feel it would be a terrible distance in case of her getting worse, and this is the only thing that makes mamma hesitate."

"I don't fancy she would get worse if her mind could be thoroughly roused and interested. Do you know what sort of a person Mrs. Vincent is?"

"I have never heard much about her, but I know she is a perfect lady, with a great deal of refinement and many intellectual tastes. Her son told us that she goes more into society on the continent than she ever did in her own country."

"What does your brother advise?"

"That Bella should go; he has abundant confidence in Mr. Vincent's judgment."

"Then I consider the matter as settled."

"Why?"

"Because you have all abundant confidence in your brother's opinions."

Catherine smiled.

"Perhaps we have, Dora; but you see he is



now a rising barrister, therefore his opinions ought to be worth something."

"Undoubtedly."

"Would you like to know his opinion about you?"

"What is it?"

"That you require rousing quite as much as Isabel. I believe he is half inclined to have you sent to Nice with her."

"I am very much obliged to him."

"Nay, you must not suppose he has any other motive than a sincere wish to do you good. You know you have always been a favourite with Richard on account of your attachment to poor Effie."

"I know, indeed, that I am under great obligations to him; but I am sorry that he should have any trouble or anxiety about me."

"Nonsense, Dora, as if you were not perfectly



certain that we all regard you as one of us. Isabel might as reasonably say she was sorry we thought it necessary to be distressed at her illness."

"Dear Catherine, believe me I am not insensible to all this goodness. I have been very weak, and wilful, and selfish; but I am going to do better for the future. There will be no occasion to send me to Nice."

"I never thought there would. You will have your old friend, Mrs. Allen, with you to-day?"

"Yes, and I willingly accept the task of entertaining her, though it will be a melancholy meeting for both of us."

The gentle Catherine kissed me with affectionate sympathy, and then went her ways to those quiet home duties which sufficed to give an interest to her life, and to create oblivion of

the time when she had dreamt of a joy that the heart in early youth feels to be indispensable to its happiness.

Mrs. Allen arrived that evening, and although she agitated me a good deal by the strong emotion she displayed at our first meeting, I succeeded so well in maintaining a quiet cheerfulness during her visit, that Richard yielded me a fair amount of praise, and declared that I was likely to do him some credit as a pupil after all. He would, perhaps, have been even better satisfied had he known all I had to struggle against, had he accompanied us in our daily walks, and listened to the old woman's never tiring allusions to her beloved master, and especially to those carefully treasured reminiscences concerning his devotion to me, which, in her simplicity, she fancied I must be delighted to hear about.

But I let her talk on, knowing that hers was

a nature that found relief in talking, and being determined at length to make a vigorous stand against the selfishness and supineness which had been creeping upon me since my arrival in England.

Before she left, it was settled that Isabel was to go to Nice about the end of October; and in the meanwhile Arthur Vincent became once more rather a constant visitor, and the whole domestic atmosphere seemed brightening gradually but surely.

It was a very beautiful autumn, and having a few pleasant country walks within reach, we (that is the female part of the family) availed ourselves constantly of this welcome resource and often extended our rambles to a considerable distance beyond the straggling terraces and detached villas that seem, nevertheless endless around most of the London suburbs.

One afternoon Catherine, Bella, and myself, having walked till we were fairly tired, got into some fields where the corn had recently been cut, and sat down on a sheltered bank, under a blackberry hedge, to rest ourselves before returning home.

We had not been there many minutes when the sound of whispering voices on the other side of the hedge attracted our attention, and disposed us to listen with some curiosity to the apparently mysterious dialogue.

Said the first, who was evidently a female, and not a very old one :

“ I have often thought it would be a delicious thing to be a gipsy, and to live in the woods on nuts and blackberries, but upon my word, I begin to fear my constitution requires more substantial nourishment; for I am really awfully hungry in spite of the excitement of our situation,

which ought to act as a stimulant if we were true heroines. What do you say Nelly, to our walking on, and trying to find a baker's or a pastrycock's shop?"

"Nonsense, Agnes," replied the second speaker in a much less agreeable, though equally youthful voice, "you know if we venture near any human habitation by daylight, we run the risk of being discovered and carried back with ignominy to Ashfield House. I would sooner perish under this hedge, than encounter Miss Pinch's scowl after the trick we have played her. For my own part I am feeding upon the thought of the reception she herself will meet from Madame Treville, when she has to relate the amusing intelligence of having lost two of the precious lambs entrusted to her care."

"Poor Pinch, though after all," said the first speaker, "I don't know that she quite deserved

such a very severe punishment. You are horribly hard hearted, Nelly, and if it wasn't cowardly to desert you, I do believe I should be inclined to make my way back, and submit to the penalty with the best grace I could."

"The penalty," said the other sneeringly, "would be nothing short of public disgrace and expulsion, whereas, if we can manage to get to Margate and hide for a week, our friends will have had too great a fright to scold us much when we return. I'm not a bit afraid of mamma, and if you were not so puling and sentimental about that odious old Pinch, I should enjoy our situation as the most glorious fun in the world."

"Well, it is fun, Nelly," exclaimed Agnes, with a sudden ringing laugh, "and you know I'm not a bit more afraid of my dear old aunt and uncle than you are of your mamma. I cannot,

however, agree to keep them a whole week in misery. I think two days of donkey riding and bathing, and seeing all there is to be seen will be enough for us both."

"That depends," replied the evidently unscrupulous Nelly. "We must manage to get at the *Times*, Agnes, for the rare fun of reading the advertisement they are sure to put in. I know exactly what it will be."

"Hush, Nelly, I heard a movement, and I believe whispering, on the other side of the hedge. If anybody was under that bank they could have heard every word we have said."

"Stuff, Agnes, you are always full of fancies. Listen now to the advertisement:—'Missing, since yesterday morning, between twelve and one o'clock, two young ladies from Madame Treville's establishment at Ashfield House, Upper Holloway, supposed to have made their escape while



walking out under the care of the junior teacher, who can, however, give no account of their mysterious disappearance. In person they are both rather tall and slight, one has dark hair and eyes, and—and '—what shall I say about your beauty, Agnes?"

"That it is of the most striking description, of course."

" 'Dark hair and eyes, and every youthful charm that can fascinate the imagination; the other is fair, and not without attractions, though these are less dazzling than those of her companion.' "

"You are too modest by half, Nelly; and allow me to suggest that your advertisement is already swollen out beyond all reasonable limits; Madame Treville will scarcely think her runaway pupils worth the price so much pathetic eloquence would cost."

“But the wealthy Mr. Seton at least would not grudge a few extra shillings in the description of his charming and accomplished niece.”

At this name we all three exchanged looks of surprise and intelligence, and Catherine, who had been from the beginning maturing a resolution, whispered to us that she would go round at once by a gate at the end of the field, and confront these daring school-girls.

Isabel and myself, applauding her courage, and wishing her success, sat still in our places under the bank ready to intercept the young ladies should they discover our vicinity and attempt to escape.

But nothing of the kind occurred, and in less than ten minutes we had the satisfaction of hearing Catherine addressing them in her calm, firm voice, and giving them to understand that their meditated journey to Margate must now be

abandoned. They both appeared startled, if not frightened at her sudden arrival, and when she added that she knew a gentleman of the name of Seton residing not far from Croydon, the girl we had guessed to be his niece exclaimed, in evident consternation :

“It’s my uncle I declare; so you see, Nelly, it’s all up with us.”

Nelly was still disposed, however, to be somewhat saucy and independent, and declared that no force should compel her to return to Ashfield House. She did not know what right anybody had to interfere with her, and had always heard that listening was unlady-like.

Without paying the slightest heed to this, Catherine told them both to rise and come with her.

“We have a long walk to my home at Highgate,” she said; “but once there, you will be

taken care of until your friends can be warned of your situation."

She then called to Bella and myself to join them, and with our two fair and rather sulky prisoners guarded between us, we retraced our steps as quickly as we could, and arrived just as Richard and his father came home to dinner.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE LADY FROM ASHFIELD HOUSE.

HAD the imaginary advertisement which had excited the mirth and wit of these young ladies been real, it would scarcely have exaggerated the personal attractions of Agnes Seton. Without possessing any great regularity or symmetry of feature, her face had a winning charm about it that went far beyond mere beauty. Some might indeed have said that she had too much

colour, that her expression was too changing and restless, and that her mouth would have been prettier had she opened it less frequently to talk or laugh; but all, even the most fastidious objectors, must in the end have acknowledged that she was a sweet, loveable creature, with just that kind of fascination which makes its way so readily to the human heart, and creates unbounded indulgence towards the faults which too often accompany it.

Of course I am giving now the impression Agnes produced after some weeks of intimate acquaintance, and not that which on her first strange introduction she made amongst us.

It was unquestionably a very awkward and trying position, that both these young girls were in, and while we could not but severely blame their selfishness and imprudence, I believe we all

felt sincere compassion for their present shame and annoyance.

The first thing on arriving at home was to send a messenger to Holloway with the intelligence of their safety and well being. This done Mrs. Errol took them into the breakfast room, and, judging that they would not like to join the family at dinner, had a table laid for them there. As Agnes had complained of hunger more than an hour before, I doubt not they managed to make a good meal in spite of the troubles that might be looming in the distance for them. At any rate, when Catherine and myself went to carry them some dessert they were whispering and laughing together again, and Nelly, whose surname we found was Lacon, had resumed her saucy independent look, and seemed to be trying to inspire her friend with a portion of her own recklessness.

They begged to be excused from appearing in the drawing room after dinner, and as it would really have been, under present circumstances, difficult to know how to treat them judiciously, we were not sorry that they preferred being left to themselves.

Of course the adventure formed for that evening our chief topic of conversation, and I remarked that of all the family, Richard was the most severe in his disapprobation of the conduct of the runaway school girls. His own sisters had furnished him with rather a high standard by which to judge of young ladies, and beyond the home circle he had, as far as women were concerned, very little experience.

We were not surprised when about eight o'clock a carriage dashed up to the door, and a tall, fashionably-dressed French woman, with very



angry eyes, who introduced herself as Madame Treville, immediately entered.

I could not wonder, after seeing this imperious personage, that her rebel pupils should have so strong a disinclination to return to Ashfield House.

She spoke English indifferently and was brief in what she had to say. It was the first time such a frightful scandal had occurred beneath her roof, and both the young ladies were to consider themselves expelled. No earthly consideration should tempt her to receive such black sheep amongst her innocent lambs again. She had fortunately made as yet no communication to the friends of the miscreants, but she was going to drive straight from our house to that of Mrs. Lacon, which was fortunately near the Regent's park, and although it would be painful to her feelings to meet Miss Nelly again, she

would, if we pleased, give her a seat in the carriage, and deliver her into her mother's care.

As Nelly was clearly the greatest culprit in the affair, and beyond all doubt deserved to suffer, Mrs. Errol, after consulting a moment with Catherine, decided that this would be the most desirable plan, and sent Isabel to tell the young lady to get ready.

As for Miss Seton, whose conduct Madame Treville acknowledged to have been hitherto exemplary, she suggested, that if Mrs. Errol had no objection, she should remain with us till her uncle could be apprised of her situation, and come and fetch her home.

She would in any case have left school at Christmas, so madame said it could not put them to much inconvenience to receive her a month or two earlier, and she hoped it would prove a lesson to a young lady whose only fault consisted

in an exuberance of spirits, that were always liable to lead her into mischief. Their present escape could be accounted for in no other way than on the grounds of a fancied grievance against the junior teacher, who would be naturally blamed for her carelessness in losing sight of them.

When Miss Lacon came in, shawled and bonneted to attend the summons she had received, I should never have recognized in the pale, trembling figure standing motionless on the threshold, the daring, reckless heroine of the blackberry field.

But in truth the transformation no longer appeared marvellous when I turned to look at the flashing eyes of the merciless jailor to whom we had delivered her.

"Follow me, miss," was all that madame said, as bowing with haughty grace to the family assembled, she swept like an injured empress out of

the room, perfectly confident, I am sure, that she had her foot upon the neck of the hapless girl, who was so soon to pay the penalty of her wilful folly and selfishness.

Their departure, however, was a relief to us all, and now that Agnes was alone we could do no less than prevail upon her to join our family circle, though it entailed the loss of Richard's society for the rest of the evening, as he said he did not understand school girls, and if compelled to talk to her at all, should infallibly lecture her upon the impropriety of which she had been guilty.

We did what we could to amuse and interest her, but now that her companion was gone, it became evident that Agnes was less indifferent to the consequences of her fault than she had appeared while Nelly was by her side. Mrs. Errol asked her if she thought her uncle would

be very angry, and the tears came to her eyes as she replied he was too good for that, but he would be sorry and her aunt would be shocked, and they would both feel uncomfortable in receiving her under such circumstances. Yet there was no resource as she had no other relations in the world.

“Supposing your uncle and aunt made no objection, would you like to stay a little while with us?”

Dear Mrs. Errol, who but her would have thought of giving this invitation to a stranger?

“I should like it very much,” said Agnes, with a sudden flush that lighted up her brilliant eyes, “if I did not fear being a trouble to you.”

“Oh you will be no trouble, my dear, with so many young people to look after you. I don’t suppose it will be necessary to tie a chain

round your leg to keep you from running away again."

Agnes did not seem inclined to laugh this time. She only replied that she was very grateful for the kindness shown her and that she hoped never henceforth to do anything to make her friends ashamed of her.

We then led her to talk a little of her school life, and of the accomplishments she had acquired under the care of Madame Treville.

Of these she spoke modestly enough, assuring us that the only study she had taken much interest in was music, that she played tolerably well, and was considered to have a good voice.

"You must sing to us one of these days," said Mrs. Errol, "but now you are beginning to look pale and tired, so suppose you say good night to us, and let Catherine take you to your bed room."

“ Well, young ladies,” exclaimed Mr. Errol, addressing Isabel and myself when her guest was out of hearing, “ I must say, though I am no great connoisseur in such matters, that you have succeeded in bringing home as pretty and interesting a captive as was ever taken in the old days of chivalry. I rather think that Richard has evinced intuitive wisdom in keeping out of the room to-night, and I am not sure that mamma has proved herself a Minerva in urging this singing bird to remain amongst us.”

## CHAPTER XI.

## OUR SINGING BIRD.

AGNES was introduced to Richard at breakfast the next morning, but beyond acknowledging the introduction, he took no notice of the young lady, and she was still too much subdued by the remembrance of her folly to bear any part in the conversation that enlivened our morning repast.

About the middle of the day Mr. Seton arrived, in considerable excitement about his



niece, but maintaining throughout that delightful courtesy of manner which made him, of all old gentlemen, the most charming and loveable, and invested his white hairs with a grace that was peculiar as well as admirable.

After thanking Mrs. Errol for her hospitality, and especially complimenting Catherine on the firmness she had displayed in securing the run-aways, he had a private interview with Agnes, the result of which was a permission, on his part, for her to accept Mrs. Errol's invitation, on the condition that one or two of the younger members of the family were suffered to return with her when the visit should be terminated; and on Agnes's part a long fit of crying, which, she told us afterwards, was not because her uncle had scolded her, but because he had been so very kind to her.

Mr. Seton stayed with us that day, but re-

turned home in the evening, much saddened, dear old man, by the details we had given him, at his own request, of Effie Seymour's illness and death, but looking forward to having some of us in a short time to admire his flowers, and brighten up the quiet house that he feared would prove but a dull abode for the youthful and high-spirited niece.

So now we had the pretty and fascinating Agnes domesticated amongst us, and as a very few days sufficed to dispel from her manner all remnant of shyness and restraint, we soon discovered that the bird we had caught and caged was of a very rare and curious breed, and that it could sing as sweetly and gushingly as if it had never been deprived of liberty.

Such wild, untameable, untiring spirits I never saw in any other human being; such a wondrous, magical, subduing voice I never heard

issue from any other mortal lips. When she laughed it was literally as if the very spirit of joy had taken possession of her soul, and was showing to the dull world how bright and beautiful a thing real, girlish joy could be. When she sang, it was as if the spirit of music and melody was startling those who listened, with its mysterious and incomprehensible power, and teaching the cold hearts of mortals to throb with admiration and delight.

We all loved her instinctively for, in truth, she was made to be loved, and though the wisest and gravest of our party sometimes hinted that her mirthfulness bordered upon levity, and that she was evidently incapable of a single serious thought, even these prudent Mentors felt their hearts drawn within the magic circle, and went as far towards spoiling the unconscious object of their disapproval as the rest.

With one exception.

Richard, from the very first, protested warmly against the Agnes mania which he saw taking possession of all the family. He acknowledged, after awhile, her singular attractions; would listen, often spell bound, and with a dreamy expression quite foreign to his countenance, to her syren voice, but he never paid her the smallest compliment, never seemed to feel the least pleasure in her society; and if he spoke to her at all, it was generally in the tone he would have assumed in addressing a spoiled and wilful child.

He said she laughed and talked so much that it made his head ache, and effectually hindered all rational and intelligent conversation between those who were in the same room with her.

"But," said his mother, one evening when, Agnes being absent, we had been holding a dis-

cussion about her, "you must at least acknowledge, Richard, that you never heard so natural or so musical a laugh as Agnes Seton's. Old woman as I am, it positively gladdens my heart to hear it."

"I say nothing against the charm or grace of the laugh itself, mother, but you know I never was fond of laughing girls. Life has always worn a serious aspect for me, and few things make me more melancholy than to hear constant laughing about the veriest trifles."

"Well, of course to a certain extent," replied Mrs. Errol, "you are right in feeling as you do, but I think we must be a little indulgent towards those whose natures contain, as it were, an overflowing tide of joy that must, at least in early youth, have some outlet."

"I wish to be indulgent towards them, mother. I only say that I cannot admire them

as many others do, nor think it prudent, above all, to let them see that they are winning hearts through the influence of those gifts, if you will, that they ought to learn rather to conceal than to exercise."

"Then you are really of opinion that we all do wrong in letting Agnes perceive how much we love her?"

"I think you are injudicious in letting her see that you are charmed by the qualifications we have been speaking of. They are likely enough to prove a snare to her one of these days."

"Poor dear child! It would be heart breaking to see her suffer; but you must have found out, Richard, that she is not a person to whom you can on all occasions speak seriously or reprovingly. It is not a heart to be tamed by warning speeches and admonitions."

"I know that well, and all I would say to you

is this: don't go to the opposite extreme, and forget in your natural admiration of this winning child that she is a responsible being like yourselves, with a mind to be formed, and a soul to be saved."

I had never heard Richard speak so earnestly or solemnly in the family circle, and although most of us felt with dear Mrs. Errol, we were all subdued and rendered thoughtful by his words.

The father, who had not attended much to the first part of the discussion, listened gravely to its close, and then said with an earnestness equal to that of his son:

"Richard is quite right, and it is well that there has been one amongst us sensible enough to resist the magic spells that this wonderful enchantress has cast around so many of the family. We must try for the future to remember

what he has been saying, and refrain from making an idol of our little singing bird."

Query. *Had* Richard really resisted the fascinations of Agnes Seton?

In spite of the good resolutions formed that evening, I don't believe our young guest was a bit more rigorously treated, or a bit more subjected to serious lectures, than she had been before. It was all very well to talk and to resolve, but what could you do with a wild flitting creature, who was here, there, and everywhere in the space of five minutes, who laughed and sang about the house and garden during the live-long day, and who stopped your mouth with kisses the moment you attempted to utter one grave or thoughtful word?

I think of all the family, Catherine had the most influence over her, for on rare occasions Agnes would listen quietly for a few minutes to



anything she chose to say, but the truth was that the sober Catherine was as much in love with our fair prisoner as the rest of us, and she had a hope that the affection she inspired in return, would in the end give her a power that she might exercise beneficially.

That Agnes perceived how little progress she made in Richard's good opinion I could not doubt, but hitherto I don't think it had troubled her in the slightest degree. He was not often at home, and when he was his gravity and disinclination to talk on any but serious subjects rendered him an object of indifference, if not of dislike to the laughter loving, thoughtless girl, who had seen but life's sunniest side.

Amongst the lighter talents on which Agnes prided herself was the power of mimicking to a most ridiculous perfection, the peculiarities of any individuals who happened to awaken her

keen sense of the ludicrous, and one evening she had insisted on personating, for the edification of Isabel and myself, an old maiden lady whom we were constantly in the habit of meeting, and whose singularity of dress and manner were certainly very remarkable.

I had made several attempts to stop her when first she began, but unfortunately Isabel had laughed, and this was quite enough to determine the young lady to proceed. She was in the midst of an imaginary dialogue between the poor old lady and her equally quaint and funny looking servant, when Richard, unperceived by the young actress, walked quietly into the room through the half open door.

He waited with tolerable patience for the farce to be completed, and then, as Agnes turned round and faced him, very little abashed by the discovery of his presence, his brow clouded ominously, and he said in his gravest tones:

“Miss Seton, I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself, and still more I wonder at my sister and Miss Heathcott for encouraging such unfeminine levity.”

Agnes laughed merrily, and tossed back her dishevelled curls.

“You are not complimentary, Mr. Richard, and I see plainly that all my rare talents are wasted on you. But tell me now, while I rest myself for a moment, what harm there is in mimicking a funny old woman who will never know a word about it, and would be none the worse if she did.”

“The funny old woman,” replied Richard, abating not one inch of his gravity, “is a member of a Christian church, and one who does honour to her profession. Had you looked beyond the mere outside, you would have discovered that she is always clothed with the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which St. Paul

tells us is a better adorning for a Christian woman than gold or pearls or costly array."

Agnes bit her lips but said nothing, and Richard turning suddenly to Isabel invited her to walk with him round the garden.

"You see, my dear Agnes," I began when we were alone, "you would have done wisely to stop when I asked you. Richard is angry and displeased with all of us now."

"Much that signifies," she said in a tone of the utmost indifference, "we are not, thank goodness, a parcel of school girls with Mr. Richard Errol for our master, though one would be inclined to think it by the airs he gives himself."

"It is only for your good, Agnes. You must remember that he is a great deal older than you."

"Oh, he is old enough in all conscience. I

am sure he looks at least a thousand when he is cross, and he is nearly always cross to me. I don't like him; do you?"

"Yes, very much indeed."

"How strange; but then you have known him a long time, and you were a friend of that beautiful Effie whom he was to have married. I can't fancy Richard Errol ever having been really in love."

"You do not understand him, Agnes. If you did you would think very differently of him."

"I don't want to think differently of him. I love all the rest of you, and *he* does not care for my love. I am sure he looks upon me as one of the most thoughtless, wicked, incorrigible beings in the whole world."

"Oh no, Agnes, if he considered you incorrigible he would not take the trouble to reprove you."

"Well, but it isn't pleasant to be always reproved either by look or word; and to speak frankly, I do not recognize his right to interfere with me."

"Yet he pays you a compliment by so doing."

"Then let him keep his compliments to himself, or lavish them upon you, Dora, since you seem to appreciate them so highly. And now do come, there's a dear darling creature, and give me a swing in the garden."

"But Richard is there with his sister."

"True, I had forgotten. Then let us put on our bonnets and go and have a run down the hill. My wild fit is on me, and I must be doing something."

## CHAPTER XII.

## MY MASTER'S THOUGHTS.

NOTWITHSTANDING Agnes Seton's warm assertion of indifference concerning Richard's opinion, I observed that from this time she carefully restrained both her wild fits of gaiety and the exercise of her questionable talents in his presence. Sometimes I was inclined to believe that his exceeding gravity was really beginning to act as a subduing influence upon her, but her

sober moods were of such brief continuance, and generally followed by such an increase of vivacity and childishness, that I could not feel certain he had anything to do with them, or that indeed they possessed any value or significance whatever.

Mr. Seton had written several times to ask when we might be expected in the country, and to express a fear that we must be wearying of his niece's society; but as Agnes herself evinced no inclination to go, and the period of Isabel's departure was drawing nigh, we were all disposed to remain together for the present, and the dear old gentleman and his sister were entreated to wait patiently, which they did.

That Agnes was sincerely attached to us all, and enthusiastically so to Mrs. Errol and Catherine, I saw plainly enough, but apart from this I often wondered what attraction she found in a



family of such very quiet and domestic habits as ours. A few serious middle-aged ladies, members of the congregation to which the Errols belonged, an old friend or two of the father's, and Mr. Vincent, were about the only persons who ever came to the house; and although the latter was no less agreeable and fascinating than he had been in poor Effie's time, he bestowed so little notice on Agnes, or indeed on any of the ladies of the family, that I could not for a moment suppose him to be an object of particular interest to our young guest.

I made up my mind at last that she shrank from the dulness of the country, and found even the calm monotony of our every day life less irksome than the quaint, formal habits and manners of her aunt and uncle.

For some little time we had all been engrossed by a matter of considerable interest, and Agnes

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was left in a great measure to her own resources. Isabel had decided, before leaving England, on joining herself openly to the church of which all her family, except Jane, were now members; and as she had given every proof of being both sincere and earnest in her convictions, it was naturally an occasion of heartfelt rejoicing amongst those who had so long mourned over her failing health and spirits.

As Richard had been chiefly instrumental in bringing her to her present state of mind, he was of course her principal confidant, and indeed for some weeks the brother had given up the whole of his spare time to his youngest and perhaps favourite sister, and the rest of us had scarcely exchanged a word with him.

It wanted but a few days to that on which the public admission of this new member was to take place, and Richard had returned home early

in the afternoon, and prevailed on Bella to accompany him in a long walk. The weather was now getting cold, and I for one found more charms in the comfortable fireside than in the sunless skies and leaf strewn roads, that must be encountered by those who ventured out.

So as the rest of the family were busy about the house, and Agnes was singing in the drawing room, it happened that I was discovered alone, crouching in my old lazy attitude over the parlour fire, when Richard and Bella, all fresh and animated from their healthful exercise, came in together.

“What are you doing?” said Richard, looking to see if I had any book or work beside me, “or were you asleep when we opened the door?”

“I was not asleep, but I suppose I might as well have been, for, as you perceive, I have been doing nothing.”

“ And yet Dr. Watts’s hymn still stands good, does it not?”

“ With a qualification, I think; for the hands may be very idle while the mind is even profitably employed.”

Isabel had gone upstairs to take her bonnet off, and we were alone.

“ Tell me now,” he said, drawing another chair to the fire, “ whether such has been the case with *your* mind, Dora? I should be truly rejoiced to hear it.”

“ Your question implies a suspicion that it is at least often the reverse,” I replied; “ and yet for some time past I have been endeavouring to merit your approval.”

“ That is too low an aim, Dora. I had hoped you had long since set yourself a higher.”

“ And why should one be incompatible with the other?”

“The one should be sufficiently paramount and engrossing to make the other of no importance. I have been thinking a good deal about you lately.”

I felt inclined to say there had been no outward evidence of it, but Richard was looking so very grave, that I only replied quietly:

“You are very kind; and what have been your thoughts?”

“Do you really wish to know them?”

“I do indeed,” though I was beginning to feel rather frightened.

“Well then, I will speak frankly. You know since your residence amongst us you have, from choice, accompanied us to our place of worship, and expressed yourself satisfied as to the preaching and teaching you have listened to there. I am not mistaken in this, am I?”

“Certainly not. I never met with the same

amount of spirituality and enlightenment in the Church of England (though I have no doubt it may be found if sought for) and therefore I am content and thankful to be instructed by Dissenters, especially as it enables us all to worship together."

"You do not then go beyond this?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are not a Dissenter yourself, from principle and conviction?"

"I have not studied the points of disagreement with sufficient carefulness to be able to answer your question satisfactorily. But do you think our outward union with any particular church, a matter of vital importance?"

"I think if we are Christians, our appearance at the most solemn ordinances of our religion a matter of vital importance, and by leaving one

church and declining to join another, you exclude yourself from this."

"But even if I were fully convinced on the point of dissent, I should still feel myself unfit to become a member of the church, or to approach the table of the Lord."

"Then you do not consider yourself a disciple of Christ?"

"I wish to be one, but I am so full of sin and weakness."

"So are all His disciples. It is this very fact that makes a Saviour so necessary and precious—but you do not require to be taught the first rudiments of the gospel. If you really feel yourself a sinner, and yet hate sin, what should hinder you from openly joining a Christian church, and becoming a partaker of its privileges?"

"Oh no, no, not yet—my heart is far too worldly and unquiet."

“And do you expect it will become less so by any efforts of your own?”

“No I know better than that—but I do not think I shall be denied Divine assistance because I make no open profession of feelings and convictions, that at times I have so many doubts about.”

“Yet you have seemed to rejoice with Isabel.”

“Undoubtedly—nobody could question the reality of her conversion. It has taught her to triumph over a strong and deeply rooted human attachment. There could scarcely be a better test than this.”

“It is a pity if you think so, that you could not apply such a test to your own case, Dora.—You have done something in the same way within the last few months.”

I knew he was alluding to Mr. Seymour, and



yet my face burned as if it had been scorched. He looked at me with evident surprise, for a minute or two, and then said:—

“ Well, I shall still anticipate the day when I can welcome another sister amongst us; and in the meanwhile, Dora, exercise a vigilant watchfulness over yourself, and be assured that *nothing* (this word was strongly emphasized) can ever give the same happiness to a child of God, as a close and consistent walk with Him, and a looking forward to the promised land.”

He left me then, without discerning that my eyes were full of tears, or knowing anything of the shadows that were closing around me.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE CASTLE IN RUINS.

ANOTHER fortnight, and Isabel had left us, taking with her, as it seemed, the last remnant of our beautiful autumn, which had yielded its place to November's unwholesome fogs and wintry skies. We all missed her in the home circle, and much anxiety was felt as to the result of her going abroad, for notwithstanding the recent marked improvement in her health and spirits, nobody

could forget that consumption had already appeared in the family, and that it was a foe they had every reason to dread.

In the blank occasioned by Bella's departure, there could, of course, be no immediate mention of sparing any of us to return with Agnes, and dull as we had become, she still evinced no inclination to shorten her visit, though I was at length sure that her spirits were losing their excessive buoyancy, and that she was beginning to have her moments of thoughtfulness like the rest of the world.

Still more wonderful she had learned to sing—and to sing with marvellous sweetness—two or three sacred melodies that Richard had bought for her.

They were very good friends now, and his admiration of her rare musical talent became more and more apparent, and even—at least I

fancied so—often allured him home an hour or two before his usual time. Agnes too had evidently forgotten that she once questioned his right to interfere with her, for she was now always asking his advice and opinion on every kind of subject, and seemed to take a pleasure in being schooled and directed by him.

It was high time I gave up the master I had so long acknowledged, since there was every appearance of his willingly devoting himself in that capacity, to a younger and more attractive pupil!

Little by little I was finding out that life's discipline cannot be accomplished by a few trials however sharp, but that it must go on, perhaps even augmenting in severity, till the heart learns the hard lesson of dispensing cheerfully with mere human happiness, and resting itself on the hope that pierces through the clouds.

But the strongest and the wisest must admit that whatever may be our actual condition on coming *out* of the furnace, we seldom appear to much advantage, or feel at all reconciled to the burning process while we are *in* it—and so I suppose it was, that I grew moody and irritable at this time, and suddenly discovered that frequent solitude was essential to my well-being.

One evening, after dinner, I had gone to my own room, intending to sit there in spite of the cold, until necessitated to join the family at the table. I don't think I was sulky, for I felt no ill will against anybody, but I was growing alarmed at the restless state of my heart; and I wanted to school it into submission and contentment.

With this view I took up the best of books, and endeavoured to concentrate my attention on

its holy teaching. I had got for my text the concluding words of Christ's admonition to Martha—"But Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall never be taken away from her," and was sighing over the contrast I found between Mary and myself, when a gentle knock at the door, followed by the entrance of Catherine Errol, scattered all my sober thoughts by reminding me of the origin of my voluntary seclusion.

"Won't you come down, Dora?" she said in her softest accents, without appearing in the least mystified at my preferring a cold bed room to a warm parlour—"Mamma has been wondering what absorbing occupation can be taking you so much away from us—and Richard declares that you pay him a very bad compliment since he is so seldom at home."

"I was only reading a little," I replied, "but

I will come down at once if you like. Has Agnes been singing this evening?"

"Yes—but not much. She has got a book now, and is sitting as quiet and demure as a little mouse. Come, Dora, it is so very cold for you here."

When I went in, Richard immediately drew a chair for me to the fire, and laying down the book he had been reading, seemed disposed to enter into conversation.

We had not had a single *tête à tête* since the day he spoke to me about joining the church.

Now, however, I did not care for talking. There was a dulness over my mind that coloured all outward objects, and I should have preferred being left to my own reflections till the fit had passed away. He was unhappy too, in his choice of a subject.

"You should have been here, Dora," he said,

"to hear Agnes sing just now. She really manages to give the most touching effect to those sweet words from Ruth, 'Entreat me not to leave thee, &c., &c.'"

"I did not know she had been learning Ruth."

"Yes, it is the last I brought home for her. You remember it was always a favourite of mine."

"Poor Effie used to sing it."

"Very softly and sweetly, but with less effect than Agnes, who has a passion and a pathos in her voice, that were wanting in Effie's. Shall I ask her to go to the piano again?"

"Not on my account. She seems interested at present in her book, and it would be a pity to disturb her."

"I think she is taming down a little, don't you?"



"Decidedly. You have achieved a great triumph."

He smiled rather ambiguously, at this, but added immediately,—

"I am flattered by your praises, though not quite sure of deserving them. Are you getting warmer than when you came down stairs?"

"Oh yes, thank you—but I had not felt the cold, particularly."

"You were, no doubt, very engrossingly employed."

"I was reading."

"May I ask what?"

"A book you would not disapprove, and one that you study yourself, I suspect, oftener than I do."

"Yet you have more time at your disposal than I have."

"True. And you may add that I have

hitherto turned it to a very poor account. I shall not be offended at your faithfulness this evening."

"You have been looking in the mirror to some purpose then?"

"I have seen myself very black and uncomely. I should be sorry for others to have the same sight."

"Should you mind my seeing your heart as it is?"

"Yes."

I was conscious of the blood mounting rapidly to my cheeks as I spoke.

"Yet I am a poor weak sinner like yourself, full of evil thoughts, clinging to a treacherous world, seeking a resting place where faith assures me there is, and must be none."

"*You?*"

"Certainly; did you ever doubt it?"

"I have, I suppose, been in the habit of at-

tributing to you an extra provision of strength and wisdom, but of course if I come to think of it rationally, you must be in the same unfortunate category as the rest of mankind."

"But then the consolation is to know that all things, even our weaknesses and infirmities, are working together for our good. If you do not lay firm hold upon this truth, Dora, you will be often stumbling upon the dark mountains."

"But how difficult to believe that the sins which beset us, and which are constantly leading us to doubt our having even entered in at the straight gate, can really be hastening our progress in the right direction."

"Of course it is understood that the sins are not wilful ones, and that they constitute our chief unhappiness."

"And yet even on these points I am afraid of deceiving myself."

“As long as you are afraid, Dora, there is not much danger. Few things are more wholesome in the spiritual life, and at the same time less agreeable, than a pious fear, but you must not encourage a state of depression such as I have observed growing upon you for a few weeks past.”

“I will try to shake it off.”

“You must, or your religion will never recommend itself to others, and after all, you know the great business of a Christian is not to secure personal happiness, but to advance and extend the Kingdom of the Redeemer.”

I pondered on these last words long and long after they were uttered, for it seemed to me that they embodied an intimation that Richard knew more of my heart than I should have wished him to do, and that he had thus cautiously and delicately conveyed to me the knowledge, that as

far as earthly prospects were concerned, I was building, or had been building, a most unsubstantial castle in the air.

Now, however, the last stone had fallen, and I could only gaze upon the ruins and murmur drearily if not repiningly, "how beautiful it was!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

## LEIGH HOUSE.

It was not long after this that Agnes received one morning, at breakfast time, a letter from her uncle, requiring her immediate presence at home, as Miss Seton had fallen ill, and there was nobody to attend to the housekeeping. It was a slight indisposition, the old gentleman added, from which his sister was suffering, but it necessitated a close confinement to her room,

and he found the solitude to which this state of things condemned him, far from agreeable. He expressed an earnest hope that at least one of his niece's young friends would be induced to accompany her, and that the whole family would consent to spend the Christmas week at Leigh House.

"Oh, how delightful that will be!" exclaimed Agnes, when she had read the last passage. "Dear Mrs. Errol, you won't refuse my uncle, will you? I was thinking only the other day what a dull Christmas I should pass; but won't we have fun if we are all there together?"

Mrs. Errol only smiled, and looked to her husband for an answer, while Richard said gravely:

"What sort of fun do you propose inviting us to join in, Agnes?"

"Oh! all kinds," she replied, laughing and

blushing very attractively at the same time, "we can dress up and act charades, and make as much noise as we please, and if there is plenty of ice we can skate upon the water in the grounds."

"I am afraid you will find us deficient in all the talents requisite for the performance of these feats. You had better get your uncle to invite a gayer party of friends."

Whether he meant to tease or only to try her, I cannot say, but if it was the latter he ought to have been abundantly satisfied, for the beautiful, sparkling eyes became quite moist, and an earnestness, not unmingled with the impetuosity that belonged to her character, replaced the previous animation, as she said :

"It is a shame of you to talk in that way, when you know very well that I would rather have all of you with me, even if you never



opened your lips from morning till night, than any other people in the world."

I am sure Richard looked pleased, though he made no other observation just then, but went on eating his breakfast as if he had no sort of interest in the question that continued under discussion.

Only when it came to the point of who should go back with Agnes to Leigh House at once, he said, without even raising his eyes:

"Let Dora go by all means; she wants change more than any of you."

And so it was decided, for although I had little doubt that Agnes would have chosen Catherine had a choice been given to her, Catherine had no inclination to absent herself from home; and Jenny was of course too busy to think of going away, even had such a step not involved the possibility of her missing a sight of her

future husband on the rare occasions of his being able to pay a flying visit to town.

For my own part I was well content to renew my acquaintance with the dear old people who had interested me so much on a former occasion, as well as to escape for a little while from the society that made my conscientious struggles so hard and ineffectual.

We had only a few hours given us for our preparations, and Richard was to allow himself a holiday for the purpose of escorting us down.

Agnes left in pretty good spirits, having obtained the promise she wanted for the Christmas week, and taking with her the various songs that she had learned to like, as well as to sing, for the sake of the giver.

It was late in the afternoon when we reached Leigh House, and although Richard was cordially

pressed to stay and dine with us, he was obliged to refuse on account of the necessity of getting back to town the same evening. I could not resist the weakness of watching Agnes as she bade him good-bye, and feelings that ought not to have been there stirred in my heart as I noted her changing colour, and caught the tremulous tones of her pretty girlish voice.

Of course Richard was not going to betray any of *his* emotions to me. He was not a child, nor was this his first attachment. So I felt it perfectly natural that he should exhibit equal kindness in his adieus to both of us, and I was grateful to him for avoiding any open manifestation of his preference.

"Take care of each other," he said, as we followed him to the hall door, where the carriage had been kept waiting, "and when we meet at Christmas let me find that Agnes has made im-

mense progress in all sorts of wisdom; and that Dora is looking a little brighter and better than she is doing just now."

Agnes sighed, though not very despairingly, as we turned away.

"Do you really think," she said innocently, "that with all my trying, I shall ever be wise enough to please him?"

"Yes," I replied, perhaps rather shortly, but I don't believe she remarked it, as immediately afterwards she led the way upstairs, singing like a bird, as well indeed she might.

Mr. Seton appeared really enchanted at our arrival, and did everything in his power to make the time pass agreeably, but after the first evening I devoted myself almost exclusively to his sister's sick room, as I found that Agnes was nothing of a nurse, and that nursing was positively required.

One day, to my great astonishment, the invalid made me a strange sort of confidence. It had begun by her asking me many questions concerning the impression that Agnes had made on the different members of the Errol family, and when I had answered these to the best of my ability, she said abruptly :

“ And now tell me candidly, friend Dorothy, whether thee hast any notion that Richard Errol looks favourably upon Agnes Seton ? ”

“ Do you mean whether I think he is in love with her ? ”

“ Thee puttest it in strong language, but that is near about the meaning I had in my mind. ”

“ I am afraid I cannot give you a very definite answer, for Richard is, you know, a person of singular reserve ; but I may confide to you my own private impression, which is that he feels a more than ordinary interest in her. ”

“I thank thee, friend Dorothy, for thy frankness, and now I will tell thee with equal candour why I have questioned thee on the subject. Agnes Seton is as guileless and innocent as a baby, and without the smallest intention of making a confidante of her old maiden aunt, she has let me see in fifty different ways that she hath a liking for Richard Errol. I have even thought well to speak about it to my brother, and we both agree that if the fancy is mutual, it would be a thing of all others we should rejoice at. Agnes is an orphan and an heiress, and were we to die, there is no saying what snares and dangers might beset her. In proper hands I doubt not she would become a wise and prudent matron, for her heart is true and womanly, though her high spirits often lead her into mischief. In Richard Errol she would find everything she needs; and I cannot but

indulge a hope that Providence has laid out the plan for the comfort of us all."

I could not utter an amen, either outwardly or inwardly, but I said that we might feel very sure that Providence would arrange what was best and wisest, and that I sincerely hoped Agnes would have a happy earthly destiny.

That afternoon, for the first time since I had been at Leigh House, I braved the cold I so much disliked, and which had become lately very biting, and took a solitary stroll through the beautiful grounds I had not seen hitherto, but when clothed in all their summer beauty.

My first walk was to the willows by the lake, but I shivered as I looked on its frozen surface, and thought of that day so long ago, when I had stood on the same spot with Richard, seeking to give him hope concerning that frail life

in which I then believed his own to be absolutely bound.

Poor, dear Effie! was she so soon to be forgotten, and for one in every way so unlike herself; for one who would probably exact an exclusive and openly manifested devotion, and be jealous of even a passing sigh given to the memory of another?

I was not prejudiced against Agnes. I had always fully recognised her claims to the love and admiration she inspired. I could quite understand any man, however wise and prudent, being captivated by such a girl, but I could not bring myself to believe that as a wife she would suit Richard Errol, even supposing that great change accomplished, without which I had never expected he would seek her for his own.

But Miss Seton's communication appeared to invest the whole affair with a reality it had not



yet assumed, and to force it upon my thoughts in a manner there was no evading. I dare not assert that there was no selfishness in the strong opposition I felt to this match making for Richard, but I am sure my earnest desire was to put self out of the question, and to begin now resolutely to look upon life, as far as I was personally concerned, rather as a mental battle field where the faithful and courageous soldier may find an ample reward in the steady performance of his duty, than as a stage for the acting out of peaceful dramas, of which sentiment and romance constitute the paramount charm.

The wintry landscape I was gazing on seemed to accord with my present state of mind, and to encourage me to expect nothing—absolutely nothing, of the bright and beautiful, to adorn my own earthly destiny. But then the sharp north wind that freshened around me, blowing over the

cold sheet of ice, and swaying rudely the dismantled branches of the bending trees, strengthened my nerves in some sort, and helped to reconcile me to the inevitable, because it *was* inevitable.

There were no forget-me-nots to gather now, and if there had been I should not have gathered them, for I knew well enough there was little danger of *my* forgetting anything in reference to the past; and if others had less faithful memories, it was no duty of mine to refresh them.

From the willows I made my way to the grove where Richard had once found me, and where his kindness and patience in listening to my difficulties had created him a place in my regard, which he never afterwards forfeited.

"And never *will* forfeit," I said to myself, "even should he do that which to my apprehension may seem doubtful in its wisdom. He is a

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mortal man, and Agnes is young, and fond, and beautiful. In loving her he has only obeyed an instinct of nature, and had he chosen me instead, the infidelity to poor Effie would have been the same."

I tried all that day to be unusually kind and indulgent towards Agnes whose spirits were becoming perfectly wild as the Christmas week approached. I don't think I was a very special favourite of hers, but when we kissed each other at parting that night, she said with genuine warmth:

"Dora, I have been thinking all this evening what a good person you are, and what a wonder it is that *somebody* should never have fallen in love with you."

"Thank you, Agnes, for your favourable opinion," I said with a smile that I felt did me some credit, "but you see *somebody* knew better

than to throw himself away upon an unattractive old maid like me."

She laughed merrily at this reply, repeating the words 'old maid,' with various indignant denials of my right to the title, as we went upstairs together.

But as if to invest me with a lawful claim to the despised, and yet in my opinion really respectable appellation, I found that night, and did not weep over it, *my first grey hair*.

## CHAPTER XV.

## THE GUESTS AT LEIGH HOUSE.

Two days before Christmas the party from Highgate arrived, all of them prepared to enjoy the change, and in excellent spirits from having received most satisfactory accounts of the absent Isabel. She was delighted with Nice, very much pleased with Mrs. Vincent, and improving daily in health and strength. What more could be desired?

"*You* have not grown fat, Dora," said Richard, when it came to his turn to shake hands with me, "I thought you promised to take care of yourself."

"I never felt better in health," I replied, "and Agnes will tell you I have been guilty of no imprudences."

He turned to Agnes who was smiling and blushing behind me.

"Has Dora been a good girl, Agnes, since she has escaped from all control?"

"Very good indeed, but I did not know that she was subject to any control even when at home. Who is her master or mistress, governor or governess?"

"You must ask her that question, Agnes; but now tell me whether you have been equally good yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know, I am afraid not. I have,

however, read pretty steadily, all the books you recommended, and I can sing every one of the songs without the music."

"Very well. And now how are you going to amuse us while we are here?"

"In the best way I can; but you know I am not mistress of the house."

"You are while your aunt is ill. Come, I am anxious to discover the extent of your resources."

"After luncheon then, I will take you and Catherine, and Jenny for a walk round the grounds, while my uncle chats with Mr. and Mrs. Errol, and you shall see whether the ice is strong enough for us to skate or slide upon to-morrow."

"I don't think skating or sliding very lady-like accomplishments."

"But in the country one must do something,

and I have been accustomed to it from a child; I must just have one good skate this Christmas. You can skate I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And I will soon teach the girls. Make haste now to luncheon—here come Catherine and Jenny, looking so smart and nice, and Dora and myself have no toilettes to make till we go out."

Richard offered her his arm, and the rest of us followed them into the dining room.

"Is not Dora going with us?" said Richard, as his sisters and Agnes entered in walking costume half-an-hour after luncheon. And being close enough behind to hear the question, I half repented of my determination (which had been proof against their united entreaties), to stay at home with Miss Seton.

"She cannot endure the cold," said Agnes in




explanation, "and my aunt is a great gainer by this shivering sensitiveness, since it procures her many hours of a society she largely appreciates."

Richard was looking across the room to me, perhaps expecting that I should give a better reason for bestowing my time upon the invalid, but I was content to leave the matter as it stood, knowing that *he* would never do me injustice.

I watched the party for a few minutes as they walked across the lawn, wondering whether Richard would think of the morning we had sat together under the willows, and how Agnes would bear, in his mind a close comparison with the lost Effie, with whom that scene must be so inseparably associated.

Then I went back to Miss Seton's room, where Mrs. Errol was already established, and taking out my work sat listening quietly to their con-



versation, and occasionally looking at the gloomy wintry clouds that the north wind was drifting across the sky.

It was rather late when the pedestrians returned, and Agnes, peeping in for a moment at her Aunt's door, asked me if I would not come and dress her hair for dinner.

"And how have you enjoyed your walk?" I said, when she had put off her bonnet and cloak, and was unfastening the heavy plaits of her beautiful hair with what seemed to me an expression of discontent on her features.

"Oh, very much," was the quick reply, "only when I wanted Richard to talk about the ice on the lake he suddenly grew so silent and thoughtful that I fancied I must have offended him. I was afraid to ask the question myself, but it struck me in the end that he must have been thinking about poor Miss Seymour."

"Very likely."

Agnessighed, and began treating her poor head very roughly.

"I wonder, Dora, if people ever quite get over a first attachment."

"Some people do it easily, and I believe there are very few to whom it is impossible."

"Miss Seymour was very lovely, was she not?"

"Very."

"And good too."

"Yes, as good as a frail and imperfect mortal can be."

"Poor Richard! I daresay he will never be able to form another attachment. It is not reasonable to suppose he will find a second Effie."

"Most assuredly not."

"Don't be taking any extra pains with my

hair, Dora. It is of no consequence in the world how I look."

"I am not taking any extra pains, Agnes. Are you going to skate to-morrow?"

"Richard says the ice is scarcely strong enough, but I am sure he is mistaken; and, anyhow, I mean to try."

"Not in defiance of his advice, surely?"

"Oh, he is not likely to advise me one way or the other. That will do now, and many thanks for your trouble."

Richard certainly was in low spirits all the evening, and even Agnes's perfect singing of his favourite songs failed to rouse him from his unusual dejection.

Of course everybody felt that it was quite natural, and most of us could entirely sympathize with him; but it was not so easy to express that sympathy, and a gloom and a

restraint were cast over all the circle in consequence.

Towards the end of the evening Mr. Errol, who had hitherto been engaged in conversation with our amiable and agreeable host, came and seated himself near me, and asked somewhat abruptly what I thought of Agnes now that I had seen her in her own home.

I said that my opinion of her had in no degree altered, and that in fact I had seen even less of her at Leigh House than I had done while we were at Highgate together, since she had generally divided her time between walking with her uncle and practising her singing, and I had willingly devoted myself to the invalid up stairs.

“ Her uncle and aunt have the highest opinion of her, but they are evidently anxious concerning her future destiny; with such a fortune

and so much beauty she will be beset with dangers."

"She ought to marry young."

Richard, senior, became meditative and silent, but I detected his eyes wandering uneasily to the piano, where Richard was turning over the leaves of Agnes's music.

Was it possible that Mr. Seton had hinted his desire to the father? or had anything in the younger Richard's manner led others besides myself into the belief that his interest in Agnes was beginning to assume a tender character?

Only once during all the evening did Richard come near me, and then it was simply for the purpose of telling me that Mr. Seton had begged him to write and invite his friend Arthur Vincent for Christmas Day.

Whether he thought this piece of news would particularly enchant me, I cannot say, but I am sure I received it with perfect calmness, and my only remark was, that I hoped it would be pleasant for him.

“You think I want a master, and a good strict one, myself, to-night, don’t you, Dora?”

“No, but I think you want a little simple prescription, which even I might venture to copy out for you.”

“Do so then, and I promise to take it if I can.”

I wrote on a slip of paper:—“Read the thirteenth and fourteenth verses of the first of Thessalonians, and believe that while the dead will surely one day be restored *to* you, the living are now sympathizing and praying *for* you.”

He spoke not a single word nor even shook

hands with me, but the look that met mine as I raised my eyes fully satisfied me that I had succeeded in reaching his heart.

And there was warmth and gladness in my own that night.



## CHAPTER XVI.

## THE FUN OF SKATING.

I WAS the last to enter the breakfast room on the following morning, and the first hasty glance I ventured to steal round the table, satisfied me that Richard had recovered his spirits and Agnes her attractive gaiety. Mr. Errol had engaged her to show him the grounds, as her uncle had a slight attack of gout and could not go out to do the honours himself.

"You will come too, won't you, Dora?" said Agnes, addressing me, "for Catherine and Jenny plead the necessity of unpacking their boxes, but are, I suspect, afraid of getting red noses this cold day."

I was on the point of agreeing to her request, when Richard said, quickly,—

"I want Dora for *my* companion, if she has no objection. My sisters refused to accompany me, and as I always make a point, when I am in the country, of posting my own letters, I have rather a long walk before me—will you go, Dora?"

"With pleasure."

I knew that Agnes's eyes were fixed upon my face, and I was anxious for this reason that it should betray as little of the heart's satisfaction as possible. I thought, however, that Mr. Errol was not likely to have a very amusing or talkative companion, and I almost expected

that the spoilt child would manage to upset the arrangement which he had made for her, and propose going with us.

But so far, I did her injustice. She was the first to rise from table, and telling Mr. Errol she would be ready in ten minutes, and wishing the whole party good morning in a perfectly unruffled tone, she left the room, and I did not see her again before I went out myself.

Under any circumstances a long walk with Richard would have given me no small amount of pleasure, but the fact of his voluntarily seeking me for his companion, prepared me to enjoy it doubly on this occasion.

Nor was I in the slightest degree disappointed, for he spoke and looked as if my presence calmed and satisfied him, and entered so much more fully into his own feelings as regarded the past and the future, than he had ever done before,

that I could not but hope my sympathy was both accepted and appreciated.

Of Agnes, also, he spoke a little, but in terms too vague to permit me to gather more as a certainty than that he had regarded her more with warm interest as a young and amiable girl, and admired her for those natural gifts which everybody allowed to be remarkable.

I began to think that Agnes had been right when she assumed the unlikelihood of his forming another really serious attachment.

Nevertheless I was very happy that morning. It was quite enough for me at present to feel that he gave me a confidence he bestowed on none besides, that he was willing to accord me a place in his regard that none other occupied. It might not be the nearest to his heart, but at any rate it was distinct and separate, for I knew, though he might hereafter grow to love Agnes,

and loving her, to seek her for his wife, he would never talk to her of his lost Effie, and of the hopes that were buried with her, as he had been talking to me this morning.

We were close to the grounds of Leigh House again when my companion said,—

“Dora, if you have enjoyed our walk only half as much as I have, you will agree with me in regretting that it is so nearly over.”

“I have indeed enjoyed it exceedingly,” I replied, fearful lest my voice should betray the extent of my happiness, “it was very kind of you to take me with you.”

“I think the kindness this time has been all on your side, Dora, and the obligation on mine, but we can settle this question on another occasion. Will you come with me on the same errand to-morrow morning?”

“Certainly, if you will have me.”

“That is decided then; and now let us go round by the lake. I want to recall something to your memory.”

Neither of us spoke again (perhaps through the influence of very different feelings) until we reached the well-remembered willows, and there looking up and across the frozen lake, every other thought was instantly put to flight by the apparition of Agnes, skating along with a wonderful rapidity of movement on its smooth, unbroken surface.

We both uttered a simultaneous expression of astonishment and alarm, for she seemed to be trying all parts of the lake, and to be skimming about with a recklessness that was well calculated to excite apprehensions for her safety.

Richard only paused for an instant, and then raised his voice authoritatively, commanding her to come off at once, and endeavouring to make

her understand by signals where the ice was likely to be the least dangerous.

At the first sound she stood perfectly still, looking at us gravely, then with a sudden, mocking laugh she started in an opposite direction, and wheeling round with considerable skill and gracefulness, when she found we remained silent, was coming at length to the side of the water where we were standing.

"Keep to the right," called Richard in a loud voice, "the ice will never bear you here."

And as he spoke, walked in the direction he indicated.

But Agnes was in one of her most wilful, obstinate fits, and though she must have known the danger, her friend's warning was unheeded. Perhaps she trusted to her light weight and the rapidity of her movements, or it might even be that in the excited state of her mind she rather

welcomed the thought of a ducking, that she might have the pleasure of being rescued by Richard.

I only hazard this last conjecture without in the least meaning to assert that it was the true explanation of her obstinacy, an obstinacy that springing from whatever cause it might, brought its own just, but not the less heavy punishment.

Richard had raised his warning voice for the third time, and I was looking on like a person spell bound by some novel sight, and yet in no degree realizing the danger that actually existed, when the sudden, startling sound of cracking ice, mingled with a frightened cry, awakened all my faculties, and concentrated them more fixedly than ever on the scene before me.

And yet now I have but the vaguest recollection of it all, of Agnes disappearing beneath the



bubbling water, of Richard darting from my side and venturing, as recklessly it seemed to me as she had done, upon the treacherous ice, of my own loud screams for help, though no living creature was within hearing, and at length of my attempting madly to follow Richard, when I heard the ice again cracking beneath his weight, and saw him disappear in his turn beneath the water, close to the place where Agnes had first gone down.

The whole occurrence had hitherto occupied less time than it has taken to relate it, and scarcely had my rash feet touched the border of the frozen lake when I had the joy of seeing Richard rise again to the surface dragging the apparently lifeless Agnes by her thick saturated dress. The sight of her pale face and closed eyes inspiring the belief that she was drowned, set me screaming more loudly than ever, and

well it was that I did so, for in spite of the shallowness of the water, both Richard and his helpless charge were in the most imminent danger, from the impossibility of his swimming through the masses of broken ice that were floating around them. But my cries this time reached some of the men employed about the house, and three or four of them came running down to see what was the matter. I believe a few minutes later their assistance would have been of no avail, for Richard's strength, taxed to the utmost by the weight he had to sustain, appeared well nigh exhausted, and it was with evident difficulty that he seized and fastened the ropes which were at length brought to effect his rescue. My own fear and agony had risen to such a pitch while watching his peril, that the instant I comprehended it was over, my head swam round, a deadly faintness oppressed me, and I knew

nothing more till I felt myself lifted in somebody's arms and had a vague consciousness that I was being carried rapidly up the sloping ground leading to the house.

\* \* \* \*

"The doctor has just gone," said Catherine, entering my room with a grave face that evening, "and he says there is great fear of fever coming on in the night, as to restore consciousness they had to give her so many powerful stimulants. Poor girl! if you could only see how like a corpse she looks. I don't wonder at her aunt and uncle being frightened."

"Catherine, I must get up. You cannot guess how it frets and wearies me to be lying here and doing nothing for anybody. My head is much better."

"But your nerves have been so terribly



shaken, Dora. Indeed you had better remain where you are, at least till after tea. Richard told me not to let you rise on any account."

"And does your brother really seem no worse from it all?"

"He only seems very anxious about poor Agnes, as indeed we all are. Who could have supposed she would have been guilty of such wild imprudence?"

"I wonder she was not missed in the house."

"When she left my father after taking him all over the grounds, she said she was very cold, and meant to have a good run by herself to get warm. To tell you the truth, both Jenny and I thought she had gone to meet you and Richard, and mamma had been with Miss Seton all the morning."

"And you say the poor old gentleman is in a dreadful state about his niece?"

"Oh yes, it is pitiable to see him walking about and wringing his hands as if there was no hope of her recovery. He will discover now, if he was ignorant of it before, that he has made an idol of this wilful girl, but I cannot think myself that she will die, it would be so very awful."

"Oh, don't talk of her dying, Catherine. Think how young she is, and what a good constitution she has. Even if a fever should come on, it would surely not be incurable."

"I cannot tell, but the doctor looked exceedingly grave, and there is to be a regular nurse to watch by her during the night."

After tea, without consulting anybody, I rose and went down to the drawing room. I found only Richard and his sisters talking together in low voices by the firelight, the rest of the household were either in Miss Seton's or in Agnes's room.

"You have been disobedient, Dora," said Richard, whose troubled, anxious countenance was the first thing that struck me, as a bright dancing flame shone full upon it; "why did you get up this evening?"

"Because I had nothing to keep me in bed, and I wanted to be with you all."

"Come, then, and sit down amongst us; here is a seat between Catherine and me. How cold your hands are."

"Oh, they will soon get warm, thank you; I have plenty of room; it is very comfortable here. You were talking of poor Agnes."

"Yes, we can think of nothing else. Poor Dora too! you were very frightened."

"I was, indeed, for I thought Agnes was dead when I saw her white face, and I was afraid you would both go down again before help could arrive."

“Your screams were the means of saving us.”

“All honour to them, then, from this time forth; but truly every circumstance in connection with the event appears to have been most providential. Had we not arrived when we did, there is little doubt that Agnes would have been drowned.”

“That is supposing she had ventured on the dangerous parts of the lake, but I am quite disposed with you to regard our going to the spot as a merciful interposition in her favour, and I sincerely trust, however it may turn out, that to her it will prove a salutary and instructive lesson.”

“I should like to find out how she is getting on now!” exclaimed Catherine suddenly; “come with me, Jenny, for I don’t much admire wandering through these dark and unfamiliar passages alone.”

“What, Catherine a coward in her old age!” said Richard in a tone of surprise.

But Catherine only smiled, and drawing her sister with her, went out of the room.

The moment I was left alone with Richard, I felt as if it would be impossible for me to utter another word, and as he sat looking very thoughtfully and sadly into the fire, I made up my mind that if the gentle Catherine had really provided for a *tête-à-tête*, her good-natured scheming would be so much labour lost.

But on a sudden my companion, rousing himself from his abstraction, and fixing his eyes, with a soft, kind expression in them, on my face, said in a low voice:

“Dora, I don’t think I ever felt the need of human sympathy to the same extent that I feel it to-night. I did not know I was so weak, but I suspect that you, very innocently, no doubt, have



ministered to and encouraged this weakness. You have often made me feel the sweetness of that which I am now craving, and yet I have never thanked you for it, never once told you how precious it has been to me, and to-night my heart is too heavy to permit of its doing anything but complain. Can you understand this state of feeling?"

"Quite well enough to yield you the sympathy you say you need, but of which I have always fancied you perfectly independent. May I add that it is something akin to pleasure to find it otherwise, since it is much more a necessity of my nature to bestow the sympathy, than it can be of yours to receive it."

"Don't encourage me in selfishness, Dora. You have no idea how much you have to answer for in that way already. I am thinking how hard it will be to dispense with the friendship

you have taught me to value, should the time ever come when duty will require me to do so."

I had hung upon his words with a breathless attention, that almost converted the pleasure into pain, and when he ceased speaking, my tears began to flow so rapidly, that I had no hope of concealing them from him, though it grieved me to add in the slightest measure to his distress.

For a very little while he sat looking at me in apparent perplexity, but with an unmistakable tenderness gathering over all his features. Then he stretched out his hand abruptly, and in an unsteady voice said :

"Dora, dear Dora," taking my hand in his own.

The beating of my heart alone answered the appeal which yet I so vaguely understood, and

still holding the hand, whose excessive trembling he must have noticed, he was on the point of speaking again, when the door opened suddenly, and Mr. Errol, all unconscious of being more unwelcome than he had ever been in his life, walked with his usual firm tread into the room.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## A GIRL'S HEART.


WE took it in turn that night to watch with the hired nurse, beside poor Agnes, who long before morning, was in a violent fever, which threatened to reach the brain, and excited the most serious apprehensions as to its result. ★

In her delirium she talked continually of Richard, reproached him for his coldness and indifference, and, in short, made it manifest to all, that her young undisciplined heart had been

given to the grave, reserved man who, in the early part of their intercourse, had done nothing but find fault with her.

"How strange it seems," said Catherine, when standing near the bed together, we had been compelled to hear some of these wild ravings, "that a girl like Agnes should have taken a fancy to Richard. If it had been Arthur Vincent I could have understood it perfectly, but one would have thought my brother the very last person in the world likely to attract her."

"There is no accounting for these things," I replied, trying to restrain all the selfish feelings that during that weary night had been struggling for the victory, "but it is not improbable that your brother's perfect indifference in the first instance may have piqued her into a desire of winning his regard, and that in the effort to gain this her own heart became interested."



“Anyhow it is most unfortunate.”

“Perhaps it may not turn out so in the end. This illness may have a good effect upon Agnes; and I know that her aunt and uncle would be delighted for her to marry Richard.”

Perhaps I ought not to have said so much; it was assuming that my own part was that of a common looker on in the matter. But I was so bewildered by what had passed between Richard and myself the evening before, so tired of speculating on the meaning of his ambiguous words, that I felt at the moment as if any certainty would be preferable to the doubts under which I had been suffering.

Catherine looked at me in unfeigned surprise for a second or two, during which the colour mounted rapidly to my cheek and brow. Then she said gently,—

"I have never spoken on the subject to Richard, and, of course, I cannot tell what he may think it right to do, but it will very much surprise me if ever he marries Agnes Seton."

She was turning away when I ventured desperately on one more question—

"Do you suppose that he knows anything of her feelings towards him?"

She hesitated for a minute, but replied at length:—

Mr. Seton had a long private talk with my brother, yesterday soon after the accident; and mamma and I have an idea that he hinted, at least, that Agnes and her splendid fortune were to be obtained for the asking."

I had nothing more to say, and Catherine went to lie down after her turn of watching.

The bright Christmas sun that gladdened

everything without, and laughed in at the windows of Leigh House, causing the crimson holly berries, with which the venerable walls had been adorned, to sparkle in its rays, met no responsive gladness in the hearts of the party assembled to enjoy the holy and social season together. The illness of our singing bird had cast something more than a gloom over us all, and the agony and distress of poor Mr. Seton, when he found that the fever was increasing, became scarcely less a subject of uneasiness than that which was the occasion of it.

Of course I did not attempt to keep my appointment with Richard, who went alone to the post that morning, while I, having had the last watch, endeavoured to obtain a few hours of repose in the quiet of my own room.

Mrs. Errol came to awaken me about mid-day, and from her I learned that Mr. Vincent had



arrived and been admitted in his professional capacity to see the invalid.


“And what,” I said, eagerly, “is his opinion as to the actual danger of her illness?”

“He thinks less seriously of it than the old doctor, whose experience has been confined chiefly to this quiet country place. And Mr. Seton appears ready to eat our young friend, for the hopes he has given him.”

“I am very glad. Poor dear Agnes! I trust she will soon recover.”

And this was strictly true—but if any of my readers suppose I had gained the victory over self without many prayers and tears—they can know little of the exceeding treachery and deceitfulness of the human heart.

In consequence of Mr. Vincent's more favourable opinion concerning Agnes, the rest of the day passed less drearily and sadly than it had



threatened to do; but it was only at dinner time that we all met together, and then I could not blind myself to the fact that Richard appeared even more troubled and oppressed than on the preceding day. Mr. Seton paid him a great deal of attention, and whenever Agnes was spoken of, turned restlessly to observe the effect produced upon the highly flattered object of her preference.

It was plain indeed that the old gentleman's devotedness to his niece caused him to forget in some degree, what was due to her as a woman, and that in the event of her recovery he would do his utmost to procure for her the guardian and husband whom his own romantic, chivalrous feelings led him to believe she loved with an unchangeable affection.

There was no alteration for the better towards evening, and when the family doctor paid

his second visit he shook his head ominously, and expressed a wish to call a consultation on the case.

Mr. Seton then introduced his guest, and they again visited the unconscious sufferer together, agreeing perfectly, at the end of half an hour's grave discussion, as to the remedies that should be used, but differing altogether in their opinion as to the probable result.

At any rate there could be no doubt that constant, skilful, and vigilant care would be required, and at the uncle's urgent solicitation, rather, I am sure, than in consequence of his offer of a princely remuneration, Arthur Vincent consented to remain for three or four days at Leigh House, as the old doctor had his hands very full just now, and appeared quite agreeable to the proposed arrangement.

I had no opportunity, nor did I seek one, of

conversing with Richard that evening, but when I bade him good night, the look of affectionate interest again shone from his eyes into mine, and made its way, whether I would or no, into the heart's inner chamber.

This night I had the first watch by the sick bed, and consequently I slept better, and was able to rise at an earlier hour on the following morning.

Ascertaining that no worse symptoms had appeared, I went down to warm myself by the breakfast room fire, and there busily engaged in reading letters and looking over newspapers, I found Richard and his father.

"Here is a letter for you, Dora," said the former, when the morning greeting had been given, "and if I mistake not, it will carry you back in imagination to scenes that you have been glad to forget. It is written on thin paper, and has a foreign postmark."

"From Madame de St. Morin," I said, receiving the letter from his hands; "it is the first time she has written to me since I left France. I am really glad to hear of her."

"Then read in peace, we will not disturb you; only first let me give you this arm chair, and place you by the fire. There, are you quite comfortable now?"

"Quite, thank you."

But I would not raise my eyes, though I felt the full sweetness of his tender, affectionate, regard.

My letter was a long one, and its contents greatly surprised me. Monsieur de St. Morin had been dead about two months, leaving the bulk of his disposable property, not to Monsieur Auguste, in spite of that gentleman's long devotion to his sick brother-in-law, and skilful manœuverings, nor yet to the tardily repentant

wife, who had wasted health and strength in a vain endeavour to atone for a past that could not be forgotten; but to the monastic institution with which his father confessor was connected, where, in consideration of this splendid munificence, masses were to be said perpetually for the repose of his soul.

As neither the children nor Madame de St. Morin were mentioned in the will, they obtained no more than what the law necessarily allowed them, but this of course formed a very tolerable income, and notwithstanding the wife's perfect knowledge that her unhappy husband was not in a sound mind when he had made the will, she would have had little inclination to dispute it, even had she not felt sure that in the event of her meditating such a step, the priests would be much too strong for her.

To her, therefore, the disposition of the dead

man's property was a subject of no uneasiness, but it was one of chagrin and impotent rage to Monsieur Auguste, who, acting upon the instincts of his despicable nature, vented his anger and indignation upon the unfortunate woman, of whose perfect innocence in this matter, at least, he must have been quite aware.

Madame de St. Morin added that, finding it utterly impossible to live in the same country with a man whose violence and malevolence frightened her and the poor children almost to death, she had at length resolved on coming secretly to England, and seeking, in some quiet spot, a refuge from the troubles that had lately beset her.

She had no friends or relatives in the country she proposed visiting, and her object in writing to me was to entreat me, if possible, to meet her on her arrival, and put her in the way of finding

a home, if I was unable to take up my abode for a short time with them, an arrangement which, she said, would not only give her the greatest pleasure, but place her under eternal obligations to me, as she was shrinking nervously from the thoughts of finding herself a stranger in a strange land.

Many apologies were subjoined for not having answered the two letters I had written since leaving France, and a hope expressed in conclusion, that when I saw how suffering and anxiety had altered her, I should be ready to forgive everything, and to pity rather than to condemn.

I had only just finished the reading of this long communication, when the other members of the family came in to breakfast, but I found time to say to Richard, who had been standing for a few minutes beside me,



"I shall be glad to speak to you on the subject of my letter after breakfast."

He smiled a willing assent, and then placing me a chair at the table, went and sat himself between his mother and Catherine.

Nothing was spoken of during the meal except Agnes, and the various symptoms her malady exhibited. Mr. Vincent persisted in asserting that she was going on favourably, and did his utmost to cheer the drooping spirits of the anxious uncle. Miss Seton, though still an invalid, had come down stairs for the first time this morning, and being constitutionally of a more hopeful nature than her brother, she was quite disposed to adopt the new doctor's view of the case.

When breakfast was over, all the party separated for awhile, some to return to the sick room, and others to take up their station with Miss

Seton in the warm drawing room for the rest of the morning.

Having a little needlework to do, I was intending to find a corner there myself, when Richard, coming after me to the door, asked if I would take a short turn with him at once.

"I will not," he said, "exact your coming so far as the post office, as you look too tired for a long walk, but the sun is shining on the terrace, and I am in no hurry to write any letters this morning."

"I will put on my bonnet and join you immediately. My letter too must be answered by and bye."

When I had read the whole of Madame de St. Morin's communication to Richard, he made no comment but only asked me what I meant to do.

"I want your advice in the matter," I said,

"but my own feeling urges me to consent to the request she has made. I mean that I believe it will be right to do so."

"But what part does your inclination take in the proposed arrangement."

"A neutral part, I think. I was never very warmly attached to Madame, but in her trouble I feel as if she had a claim upon me."

"Then you had better go, Dora."

"But I shall want advice about so many things. Where shall I recommend her to live?"

"If you are to be with her long, I shall only ask you not to go very far away."

"I should not in any case be with her long. She will require a governess for the children, and when a suitable person is found, my society may well be dispensed with. I have been thinking, if madame really seeks quiet and retirement, that

she could not do better than select a residence in the neighbourhood of my old home. I have myself a strange longing to see it once more."

"Have you? but that is so very far off."

"I suspect madame would not wish to be nearer London, in case of her brother discovering her retreat, but of course nothing can be decided till she arrives."

"And that will be—?"

"The beginning of next week. I must leave this on Saturday at latest."

"And travel to Dover alone?"

"Oh, that is nothing for a woman who is beginning to have gray hairs."

I spoke laughingly, but Richard replied very gravely:

"You have no business with gray hairs at your age, Dora. I am afraid they must have come from sorrow and anxiety."

“Not at all. They are quite natural, and not so unwelcome as you may imagine.”

I meant nothing by this observation but that I was not mourning over departing youth, but Richard evidently attached a deeper significance to it, and looking at me with an earnest tenderness that filled my eyes with tears, he said:

“Ah, Dora, how gladly, if I had the power, would I instil into your life so much peaceful brightness that you should cease to welcome the appearance of gray hairs.”

After a short silence, during which I had felt the colour on my cheeks changing rapidly, I ventured to observe:

“But is it not better at least to see without regret these silent indications of advancing age? You yourself have often warned me against setting up a too sunny resting place in the present world.”

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“True, Dora, nor would I desire you ever to do so, but when I see nothing but shadows encompassing you, it is natural, if not wise, that I should long to disperse them, and bring you out into a little genial, permitted sunshine.”

“The conviction that you *have* this kind desire, is sunshine enough for me at present. When it ceases to satisfy, I will complain of the shadows, but not before.”

My hand was drawn for a moment into his own, and a smile broke over the gravity of his face as he said softly :

“Have I not some reason to be proud of my pupil?”

“Much less,” I replied, “than I have to be grateful to my master.”

“And if it is to end here, Dora?”

“In no case can I ever forget the countless obligations I owe you.”

My voice was getting thick and indistinct, and I really longed for the scene to be over.

"There can be no obligations between *us*," he replied, with some emotion too, "but I see I have agitated when I only meant to soothe, so go in now, Dora, and strive to hope for the return of the sunshine as I do."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## SUSPENSE.


WHATEVER doubts or uncertainties I might still be assailed by, concerning points of minor interest, I could no longer hesitate to believe that Richard really loved me; and this conviction, even hampered as it was with difficulties I but partially understood, brought a delicious calm to my spirit, in which it basked as a shivering man transported suddenly into a flood of golden sunshine.

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That Agnes Se'on stood in some way between me and the happiness I might otherwise attain, seemed abundantly clear, but the exact principles on which Richard suffered her to become so formidable a barrier, I certainly failed to comprehend; and yet so great was my reverence for him, so profound my faith in his rectitude and judgment, that I never for a single instant felt inclined to murmur at the strange position in which I was placed, but rather gloried in justifying my master fully and entirely, through all the mystery that surrounded his conduct.

Before Mr. Vincent had been two days at Leigh House, the improvement in his interesting patient confirmed the first opinion he had given of her illness, and by the time I was compelled to take my leave of them all, she was pronounced even by the old physician to be out of immediate danger. Whether any unforeseen symptoms of



a serious nature would be left on the departure of the fever, no one could at present say; but her youth and admirable constitution encouraged the hope that a perfect cure would be effected; and dear Mr. Seton seemed never weary of expressing the vast obligations under which Arthur Vincent had laid him.

Richard accompanied me as far as Highgate, where I remained alone, making a few necessary preparations for my temporary change of abode, till the Tuesday following, on which day I started for Dover, beholding, on my arrival, its bold and picturesque cliffs with far different feelings from those that filled my heart on the occasion of my last sojourn at the place.

*Then* I had been crushed by a disappointment so sudden and unexpected, that the grief it occasioned might well betray me into the belief that it was the heart itself that mourned.

*Now* I had a hidden fund of happiness of which no human event could ever rob me, and whose marvellous sweetness fully convinced me that the heart had indeed only spoken once, and that in its utterance it had syllabled one only name!

Madame de St. Morin was true to her appointment, and the first glance I caught of her well-remembered face convinced me that she had not exaggerated the effects which suffering, confinement, and anxiety had wrought upon her. She thanked me with all a Frenchwoman's warmth for having come to meet her, and expressed unbounded gratitude and satisfaction when I told her that I would remain with her for a few weeks. The children were looking sickly and unhappy, and my heart opened readily to these poor neglected little girls, whom I longed to see established in an English country home, and far

away from all those influences which had been so terribly injurious to them.

We devoted that first evening to the discussion of madame's plans for the future, and I was glad to find that she was willing to adopt my idea concerning the north, as many reasons led her to think it prudent to fix herself at a considerable distance from London. It was decided, however, that we should remain there a week or two, for the sake of making a few necessary purchases, and showing the children the curiosities of the English capital.

As I was parting from the Comtesse for the night, I remarked, that I hoped very soon to see her looking brighter and happier than she was doing now.

"Ah, mademoiselle," she said, with a dreary sigh, "all that is passed for me for ever. Could I have known how very little peace or satisfac-

tion my long prayed for liberty would bring me, I should not have wasted so many years of my life in fruitless yearnings and repinings. Never for one single half hour have I enjoyed the freedom my husband's death has bestowed upon me."

"A profound lesson," I replied, "for all who imagine that it is only circumstance which stands between them and happiness."

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Once more the bright and gladdening spring had established its reign upon the rejoicing land, and Nature was making amends for its long state of torpor, by revelling with a charming abandonment in the myriad pleasures the sunshine and balmy air brought with them. The month of May had opened with April showers and winds, that made my exiled friends long for at

least the climate of the sunny south, but all this was over now, and the merry month was closing with days of unbroken sunshine, and zephyrs, soft enough to bring health and cheerfulness to the sick in body and mind.

My sojourn in the north had been prolonged to the present time, owing to a serious and tedious illness with which Madame la Comtesse had been attacked immediately after our arrival. In this state it would have been impossible to leave her to the care of strangers, and, indeed, she manifested such utter dependence upon me for everything, that I knew the very mention of deserting my post would have been sufficient to increase her malady, which was a kind of low, nervous fever, brought on by the long succession of trials she had undergone.

I had been fortunate in securing for her a very pretty, comfortable cottage, on the outskirts of the village. It was detached from all the other

houses near, and surrounded by a large garden and orchard, which last was to the children a source of great enjoyment, and enabled them, now that the summer was coming on, to spend a considerable portion of every day in the open air. Still more fortunate did I account myself in finding my old servant Charlotte disengaged, and quite willing to undertake the duties of an establishment in which I was likely to be a frequent guest.

So, in spite of some drawbacks, we had got through the cold winter tolerably well, and I was rejoiced to find that as the illness of Madame de St. Morin abated, her spirits wonderfully improved, and, joining with me in superintending the studies of her intelligent little girls, she seemed in a fair way of attaining a larger amount of actual happiness, than life had ever bestowed upon her before.

Not unfrequently indeed did she now take *me*

to task, and playfully assert that within the last few months we had quite changed characters. But though I always tried, after such accusations, to convince her they were undeserved, I had in truth much more cause for depression than I felt inclined to communicate.

For a few weeks after leaving my friends at Leigh House I had received constant communications from one or other of them, oftener from Richard than from any of the rest, and at length I had the real satisfaction of hearing that Agnes was so far recovered as to be able to be removed to Highgate, where the air was considered more bracing than at her own home, and where also she would have the benefit of Mr. Vincent's continued attendance, which had necessarily been suspended on his return to town. In one of Catherine's earliest letters she had told me that on seeing Richard for the first time after her illness, poor Agnes had betrayed such uncontrollable



emotion, that the uncle appeared more than ever bent upon the match, and failed (with a blindness his age and devotion to his niece could alone account for) to perceive that Richard himself was in no way desirous of becoming his nephew.

"And yet," wrote Catherine, "I scarcely understand my brother's faltering at all in the matter. He is evidently annoyed, out of spirits, and more reserved with his own family than ever. I can only think that he is lamentably deficient in the tact necessary to extricate himself honorably and creditably from so awkward a position. Richard was always a very shy man, and this shyness is probably a formidable hindrance to his speaking the simple, though unpalatable, truth at present.

I read this letter without much, if any uneasiness, for I thought I knew Richard too well to fear that he would ever act against his conscience through the influence of a mere peculiarity

of disposition, which might certainly dominate for a time but must in the end be conquered. His own letters never touched upon the subject in question, and were written in the same style and with no more particular tenderness than distinguished those I had received from him while in France.

Still I was quite contented and happy as long as I continued to receive news of any kind from my friends in London; but within the last two months I had only had one short letter from Catherine, in which she said that Agnes was still with them and going on very favourably, and that they were all so busy preparing for Jenny's marriage that they had literally no time for anything. This interesting event was to take place at the latter end of May, and they all regretted that I held out so little hope of being able to return to them by that time. A post-script informed me that Richard was away on

the western circuit, and not expected home for several weeks.

This latter fact sufficiently accounted for *his* silence, as I knew he could have no leisure for writing letters; but the absence of all communications from the rest of the family set my imagination to work, and it fabricated a web of such dark and unattractive colours that it was no wonder my heart should grow heavy in contemplating it.

“Come, *chère amie*,” said the Comtesse, suddenly presenting herself at the door of my own little room one lovely evening, “let us go with our books and work and join the children in the orchard. I cannot bear to see you look so dejected, and I am sure watching this beautiful sunset will do you a world of good.

I put up my writing materials immediately, and complied with her request, though I had seldom felt less disposed for conversing on indif-

ferent subjects, or for joining in the children's innocent, but noisy games.

Self, however, must be conquered in things of lesser as well as of greater importance; there was no truth that my mind received and acknowledged more clearly than this, and consequently I not only forced myself to go with the Comtesse to the orchard, but I played with the little girls till they were nearly as tired as myself, and then, sitting down by their mother, who was admiring the sunset and working at her favourite embroidery, I endeavoured to lead her to speak on those subjects of the highest interest, which as yet she so dimly understood, but which I had reason to hope her world-sickened mind was beginning to grope after.

The shadows were deepening around us, and the wind freshening in the orchard trees, before either of us thought of remarking how late it was; but suddenly our conversation was sud-

pended by the sight of Charlotte coming from the house with a letter in her hand, which, as madame had no correspondents, I knew must be for me.

“Now, *ma pauvre* mademoiselle, you will be happy!” exclaimed my companion with a kindly smile, “and therefore I will go in with the children, and leave you alone. You will tell me the good news when you come in.”

This was the letter:

“MY DEAREST DORA,

“I have no time now to make excuses for my long silence, though I know a thousand are due to you. Jenny was married yesterday, and the really happy pair are gone to the Isle of Wight for a week or ten days, which is the extent of the time Mr. Nugent can be spared from Lismore. Mama and myself are to go down in a few days for the purpose of getting their house

in order, and receiving them on their return. *Other circumstances*, which will be explained to you later, have kept us so fully engaged, that literally the clearest and calmest headed amongst us have been almost bewildered. Richard only got back a week ago; probably you will hear from or of him shortly. I am ashamed of this letter in every way, but indeed, my dear Dora, I scarcely feel myself to-day after all the excitemen we have recently gone through. I must not forget to tell you that Jenny left word she hoped and expected you would pay her a long visit before settling down quietly at Highgate again.

“With affectionate love from all,

“Believe me, my dearest Dora,

“Ever yours, in sisterly regard,

“CATHERINE ERROL.”

Truly it *was* a strange letter, and joyful as I had been on receiving it, my mind was left in a

more unsettled state after reading its contents than it had been during all the long silence that preceded it. The point that struck me as most significant was Catherine's avoidance of even the name of Agnes Seton. In every previous letter she had spoken of her freely, and indeed made her the chief subject of her correspondence. Now even supposing that Agnes had quite recovered her health, and gone back to Leigh House, still they must be constantly hearing of her, and Catherine knew well how greatly I was interested in the question connected with this young girl and Richard, which she had always so willingly discussed with me before.

Was it possible that after all, he had lacked courage to speak the truth, and witnessing Agnes's devotion to himself, and being urged to the match by the short-sighted and infatuated uncle, had consented to take as his wife a girl whom *I knew* he could not love?

If so, then indeed I had fashioned an idol out of ordinary clay, and the master I had so enthusiastically revered would henceforth serve but as a warning to me not to put unlimited trust in any of mortal kind.

But was this all? Had I attained to such heights in philosophy or self-abnegation that I could dispose of the matter with a sigh and an alas! for the frailty of human nature?

Reader, it was *not all*; but for the rest you must find out depths in the sobbing and complaining heart to which no words of mine could guide you. You must use that subtle, inner sight which only experience can give, and if it shows you anything of the truth of the case, then pity me if you will!

"You are pale, mademoiselle," said madame, when, an hour after we had parted, I entered her cheerful little sitting room. "It is not, I hope, bad news that you have received."



“The only actual news I have received is of Jane Errol’s wedding,” I replied, “and this has given me pleasure. If I look discontented it is rather from what I have *not* heard than from anything my friend has told me.”

“Then you must cheer up, you who can so well console and preach to others who are cast down. Try to believe that if it rains to-day, the sunshine will come to-morrow.”

And I did pray when alone that night, that however fierce and pitiless this rain might be, however long the floods might be permitted to continue, the sunshine of a quiet and contented spirit might at length triumph over and disperse them all, and thus enable me to prove to the world and to myself, that it is not circumstance which forms or mars a Christian’s happiness.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## A BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.

THE next morning as I was giving the little girls a lesson in English, which they began to speak very prettily, I was considerably startled by the abrupt appearance of Charlotte at the open window, her face glowing with excitement, and her whole manner denoting an anxiety to communicate some important news, of which she had become the enviable depository.

“What is it, Charlotte?” I asked, seeing that she waited to be questioned, like one who

esteems what he has to communicate too highly, to give it up without a little coaxing.

“Well, Miss, what do you think? There’s the most beautiful carriage you ever saw, with a pair of the loveliest white horses, arrived this morning at the Crown Hotel, and they have engaged the best rooms for a week, and all the poultry and eggs in the village have been bought up by the master of the Crown, and the butcher grudged me the loin of lamb I wanted for our dinner, and the green-grocer said that to spare even a pint of peas was an impossibility, and she wondered at me for asking for such a thing, and in short, miss, the whole village is in a state of fever.”

Pausing here for want of breath, as the poor girl had spoken with a curious rapidity, I ventured to say :

“And really, Charlotte, anybody who had listened to your narrative, might well suspect

you of being infected with the disease, for you have left me under the extraordinary impression that all this unnatural excitement has been occasioned by the arrival at the Crown of a carriage and two white horses, for whom the best rooms have been secured, and on whose behalf the village tradespeople have been obliged to refuse everything in the shape of delicacies to their regular customers."

"La, Miss Dora, did I ever? Why surely to goodness I told you that it was a bride and bridegroom who had arrived, and who are going to spend part of their honeymoon here to see the scenery. How stupid of me to leave out the best part of the story, but that impudent greengrocer I suppose was running in my head. But oh dear, miss, I caught one glimpse of the bride when she stepped out on the Crown balcony for a moment, and I never in all my life saw or heard of such a beautiful lady, though she looks al-

most a child, and can't be above eighteen if she's that."

"And the bridegroom, did you see him too, Charlotte?"

"No, miss, for he was inside the room, but if they're here for a week, we'll have plenty of opportunities of getting a good look at them both. It's the least they can do to show themselves about, as they are going to eat up all the best things in the village."

I smiled at this original mode of reasoning; but told Charlotte that she would do well to get to her work now, that she might be free by and bye to gratify herself by looking after these interesting owners of the beautiful carriage and horses.

Scarcely, however, had I resumed my task of instruction, for my pupils had a few observations to make first on the intelligence we had been listening to, when Charlotte again obtruded

unceremoniously upon us, this time bursting into the room, and declaring that we must all make haste out into the front garden, as the carriage, with the bride in it, was coming rapidly down the road in the direction of our house.

“The children may go if they like,” I said, seeing how anxious their little faces had become, “but really, my good Charlotte, I cannot consent to perpetrate an act of so much impertinence as to stand watching this young stranger, and you must remember that I have not lived quite all my life at Watermere, and therefore this grand sight—”

“La, miss,” interrupted the impatient Charlotte, whose eyes had never for an instant been turned from the window, and whose head was now half protruding from it, “I do declare as I’m alive, the coachman’s slackening his pace, and staring with all his might at this very house. I do believe they’re going to stop here. May

be after all it's some of your friends, or Madame's from foreign parts. Well, who ever would have thought it?"

To say that I felt at all calm or self-possessed while this little scene was going on, would be to assert not only a falsehood but something that no one could possibly believe of me. In point of fact, an idea *had* struck me when Charlotte first spoke of the extreme youth and beauty of the bride, but I had dismissed it almost immediately, as I recollected what hundreds of young and beautiful brides were probably at that same time travelling about England.

But the moment my zealous informant discovered that the carriage was approaching, and in all probability intending to stop at our cottage, the vague suspicion I had formed became conviction, and without waiting to have it further confirmed, I left Charlotte to her

wonderment and surmises, and almost flying to my own room up-stairs, shut and locked myself in, and then stood with hands tightly pressed on my eyes, thinking what was to come next.

I had not much time given me for thinking, for the plain sounds of opening doors, of hurrying feet, and of mingled voices, told me that the worst had indeed come, and must be met bravely.

I remembered that Charlotte had mentioned the bride only, as being in the carriage when she had first seen it approaching our house, and though it would be but a postponement of the one great ordeal, still this postponement was something, as it would enable me to prepare myself a little for going through the necessary and expected forms of joy-wishing, congratulation, and so forth.

With Agnes alone I had not much fear of betraying more than ordinary feeling, and



perhaps by the time Richard joined us, I should have grown accustomed to regard him as the husband of another.

Why they should have chosen Watermere of all places in the world for the scene of their honey-moon I could not of course divine, unless it was that Richard thought the sooner I witnessed his contentment as a married man, and his wife's devotion, the sooner I should reconcile myself to my own state of spinsterhood, and forget that anything brighter had ever presented itself as a distant possibility to my imagination.

But Charlotte was by this time knocking importunately at my barred door, and telling me that the lady, who would give no name, was waiting most anxiously to see me.

One hasty glance into the faithful mirror, one dismal smile as I observed that the three or four grey hairs I now owned, were this morning obtrusively in sight, and then without even

changing my plain linen collar, I walked firmly down stairs to the drawing-room, and the next moment was folded in Agnes's encircling arms, and conscious of her warm tears on my cheek.

*I* did not cry at all.

And yet which of us, I thought, had the most cause for tears.

As soon as the first excitement had a little subsided, Agnes took the chair I placed for her, and said :

"I knew you would be surprised, Dora; it was all my fault that you heard nothing of what was going on. I meant to come to your pretty Watermere for a week, and I thought it would be such fun to present myself suddenly before you as a bride; but now tell me frankly (for I see those earnest eyes of yours are fixed very steadily upon me) whether you find me much changed."

"Frankly then, Agnes, I do find you greatly

changed. You have lost all your bright colour, and you are considerably thinner than you were. I had understood, however, that your health was quite re-established."

"As much as it is likely to be, I believe," she replied, with a momentary shade of sadness crossing her still lovely face, "but I was so near killing myself by that mad trick of mine, that I cannot expect but to reap the consequences all my life."

"And your husband, Agnes, I hope he is well, and that I shall have the pleasure of seeing him also by and bye."

I had forced myself to say this, because it seemed so absurd that neither of us should make any allusion to the yet invisible bridegroom, and I felt it would occasion me less embarrassment to mention him myself in the first instance, than to hear him spoken of by his wife.

"Oh, he is quite well, thank you," replied

Agnes, with a serenely happy smile, "and he promised to walk down and fetch me in half an hour. I stipulated for that time to have a cosy chat with you alone, and we both hope, nay, fully anticipate, that you will dine and spend the evening with us."

I felt very much as if something was threatening to choke me, but I had begun my part well, and I knew I must play it out. So in reply to the bride's obliging invitation I said, that I would come if they really wished it; and then with a view of obtaining a little temporary relief, I asked about Jane and her husband, and heard in return numberless details connected with the double wedding.

Still during all this time Agnes had never once *named* her own husband, and I could only account for it by supposing that she had guessed more of my feelings towards him than I had wished any living creature to discover. I tried several

times to remedy her omission, but the familiar christian name seemed ever to die on my lips when they sought to utter it, and "Mr. Errol" I could not bring myself to call him.

At length Agnes changed the topic of conversation altogether, and made me tell her about the Comtesse and her children, and how I had got through the winter, and many other things which filled up the time and kept me from looking every minute at the clock, as I was too much disposed to do, with nervous dread and trembling.

"You will take some lunch," I said during a momentary pause in our *tête-à-tête*; "at least a glass of wine, Agnes, for you look very pale and delicate."

"Nothing, nothing, dear," she replied quickly, "I had luncheon before I left the hotel, and you must know I never look otherwise than pale and delicate now-a-days. But just see, Dora, how

late it is getting. That treacherous man has actually left me an hour and a half instead of half an hour."

"Shall I introduce you to the Comtesse?"

"Not now, please, because we want you all to ourselves to-day. Hark, Dora, that was surely your garden gate."

"Yes," I replied; but if my life had depended on it, I don't think I could have walked to the window.

Agnes did so, however, and announced gaily that it was indeed the truant at last.

Now, in truth I was conscious of my exceeding weakness, and trembled inwardly more than outwardly at the discovery of the poor heart's continued thralldom. I would have given all I possessed, and esteemed it a trifling sacrifice, to escape this meeting; but hope or help there was none, and so with an upward glance of agonizing entreaty, I turned resolutely to the opening door,

and the next moment felt my brain grow dizzy like that of a person who awakes but in part from a troubled dream, when I saw Agnes spring forward, and with a bright glance of triumph and intense enjoyment, lead in and present as her husband, not Richard Errol, but—Arthur Vincent!

## CHAPTER XX.

## AGNES'S STORY.

It is my satisfaction still to remember that I betrayed neither by word nor look any of the overwhelming emotions I could not but feel at this strange disclosure. I suppose it was woman's tact that came immediately to my aid, enabling me, without much effort, to preserve my woman's dignity. At all events I kept my own counsel, and was fully persuaded that from whatever motives Agnes had chosen to mystify me,



she had made her husband no party to the scheme.

I received and congratulated him therefore with unfeigned pleasure, and Agnes taking care that he should now do the principal part of the talking, the half hour he stayed was very little of a trial to me, considering with what varied sensations my heart was beating. They wanted to carry me back with them at once, but to this I could not agree for many reasons. I promised, however, to join them by four o'clock, and Agnes said we would have a long drive after dinner, to see some of the beauties of the neighbourhood.

Oh, how precious was the solitude to which at length they left me! how cooling and refreshing were the tears I shed in the quiet of my own room, and how much dearer did my re-found happiness seem to me than it had ever done before. I could well afford to be magnanimous

and to forgive Agnes for having amused herself by placing my deepest feelings upon the rack, but I was still at a loss to understand how her own had so quickly changed their object, or wherefore it had pleased her to keep me so long in ignorance of this change.

I had to give a little time to Madame de St. Morin, before leaving her for the whole evening, and the efforts necessary to bring down my thoughts to every day objects (for she had some business to consult about) was of great benefit in equalizing the whole tone of my mind, and taking it off that hateful "self," which is ever urging its monster claims.

The bride and bridegroom welcomed me with open arms, and Arthur said very innocently that I was looking infinitely better than in the morning, while Agnes, with a half smiling, half penitent glance at me, told him he was no judge of ladies' looks, and that his compliments were too common-place to be worth having.

The dinner passed over very gaily and pleasantly, and beginning to turn my attention with interest as well as curiosity to the married couple, I thought I discovered that the romantic love was all on Agnes's side, while Arthur regarded her, at present, rather with a kind of brotherly tenderness (and this excited in part by her continued delicacy of health) than with that ardent devotion of which I knew him to be capable.

But the young wife was apparently more than satisfied, and under these circumstances I could not consider her as an object of pity, or feel much anxiety on her account.

Arthur Vincent's was not an every day character, and although he might not at once enshrine the childish but winning Agnes in the same place in his heart that Effie Seymour had occupied, I had not a doubt that if the wife he must certainly have *voluntarily* married, did nothing to disappoint his expectation, the time

would come when she would have no dead or living rival to apprehend.

"Go and smoke your cigar in the garden, Arthur," said Agnes, when the dessert had been placed on the table. "I know you enjoy that more than fruit or wine, and Dora and myself have still half an hour's private chat to get through before our drive."

The husband appeared nothing loth to do as his wife requested; and bidding her not forget, in the midst of her gossiping, that she was the hostess and I the guest, he left us to amuse ourselves as we liked, until the hour the carriage had been ordered.

"And now, dear Dora," exclaimed Agnes, filling my plate and glass as she spoke, "before I say another word, do tell me that you forgive me. Not a living creature guessed why I invented this little plot, and in truth I scarcely know why I did it myself, unless it was that I

felt a naughty desire to have one good bit of fun before yielding all my girlish wilfulness and privileges for ever. I know now, without seeing you look so grave, that it was no fun to you, and I am really very very sorry, and dreadfully ashamed of myself into the bargain; but do, there's a dear, say you forgive me, and then I am going to tell you all about how I came to marry Arthur."

"I forgive you freely, Agnes," I replied, "but I must entreat you, in consideration of this forgiveness, never to allude to the subject again, and now let me hear your own history."

She came round and kissed me very heartily first, and then resuming her seat began the promised narration.

"You know, Dora, that when you left me at Leigh house, hanging as it seemed between life and death, I was still desperately in love with Richard Errol. Even in the worst of my illness

I can remember thinking of him as the preserver of my unworthy life, and wondering (if I never recovered), whether they would let me see and thank him before I died. I had begun to like him from the time he used to take me to task for my wild tricks; and when I found that he had the patience and the goodness to try to make me wiser, the charm was complete, and I felt as if I would have given my life to be assured that he loved me. Occasionally while with you all at Highgate, I was mad enough to believe that he *did* regard me with some peculiar interest, and when you and I went down to my uncle's together, I was so full of these presumptuous hopes, that my aunt read me like a book, and naturally concluded that Richard had manifested at least a decided preference for me. Dora, I assure you on my honour, it never occurred to me that the man who had won my heart was anything to you, or you to him, until that fatal morning when he

asked you to walk with him to the post office. Then for the first time in my life I felt the miserable and wicked feeling of jealousy, and not to tire you with a detail of my sufferings, this it was that prompted me to go and skate so madly on the ice after I had left Mr. Errol. I was reckless as well as wretched, and although the thought of actual danger never suggested itself to my mind, I am sure it would not have deterred me if I had been certain of its existence. When I saw you and Richard approach the lake together and stand watching me, I positively trembled with anger, and took a savage delight in disobeying his commands. It was only the sound of the cracking ice and the touch of the cold water that seemed to restore my senses, but the remedy was a rough one which soon deprived me of consciousness altogether, and would have deprived me of life had he not generously risked his own to save me. But now I am coming to

the period, when, through Arthur Vincent's skill and attention, and the good nursing of all my kind friends, I was pronounced out of danger. It was dear Catherine, I remember, who first told me that the doctors said I should recover, and after a little pause (during which many strange and serious thoughts had been flitting through my brain), I asked her when I might be permitted to see and thank her brother. She looked grave, but replied that she would name my wish down stairs, and the next day Richard was brought into my room. You may well believe, Dora, after all that had occurred, that I could not meet him without emotion, but it was an emotion quite different to that I should have felt before I suspected his attachment to you. My poor uncle, however, as I have since discovered, saw nothing of Richard's indifference, and fancying me still desperately in love, did all in his power to bring about a union between



us. In the meanwhile, as no agitating or exciting subjects were ever to be discussed in my presence, I could not know what was going on outside my sick room, and Richard went back to Highgate long before I was well enough to be removed from Leigh house. At length this removal took place, and once more I was placed under Arthur's care and advice. He visited me almost daily, taking evidently great interest in the case he had treated so successfully, and, as I grew stronger, used sometimes to walk round the garden with me and talk to me in the serious earnest manner Richard had formerly done. Perhaps you will think me deficient in taste when I say that Arthur, as a man, is certainly more attractive than Richard Errol; but I really believe, Dora, most people would agree with me in this. At any rate the fact soon became sufficiently obvious to my mind, and I daresay Arthur found it out. He never said a word to me, however,

and I began to think I was doomed to love a second time in vain. I then became unhappy and low spirited, and expressed a wish to return to Leigh house. My uncle received me with the greatest fondness, and still under the impression that it was Richard I liked, asked me whether it was all settled between us yet. I assured him that I had quite got over that first fancy, which had only been on *my* side, and that now probably I should never marry at all. He seemed surprised but let the matter drop, and of course I never gave the slightest hint of my preference for Arthur. I am afraid, dear Dora, I am wearying you dreadfully, but the end is just coming. One day my uncle told me he expected Mr. Vincent to dinner, that he had invited him because he feared I was not getting strong so fast as I ought. I replied I should be very glad to see him, which was true enough, and then I saw that my uncle was watching my counten-

ance, and I ran away from him and did not come down again till dinner time. On this occasion Arthur was particularly kind and attentive to me, and after dinner we all walked about the grounds till nearly dark. He told my uncle I wanted complete change of air and, and recommended that if possible I should be sent abroad in the spring. From this time he came to Leigh house very constantly, and though he was more with my uncle than with me, I began to hope that I was not an object of indifference to him. At length one bright, happy, ever to be remembered day, he took me out for a walk and asked me to be his wife. I need not tell you what my answer was, or how gladly my uncle and aunt received the intelligence of our engagement. I will only add that our friends at Highgate knew nothing about it till a fortnight before our wedding, which had to be a little hurried because Mrs. Vincent had written for her son to come

and fetch her and Isabel Errol home. So this was considered an excellent opportunity for me to travel, and after we leave the lakes we are going to Nice, and shall probably all come back together about the middle of July. So now, Dora, you have the whole story, and I have your forgiveness, and there is the carriage at the door. Come and let us get our bonnets and enjoy as much of this lovely evening as we can. Arthur is so pleased to have you with us."

I had no reason to doubt this latter assertion, and to me as well as to the bride and bridegroom that first drive we took together through some of the fairest scenes around my beautiful Watermere, was full of enjoyment.

We parted at a late hour, and not until Agnes began to look like a drooping lily and to call forth her husband's tenderest cares. They made me understand that I belonged to them during their stay at Watermere, and Agnes whispered, as she followed me to the door:

“In a little while, when Dora is wanted, another besides Dora will have to be consulted about the matter, therefore we must take every advantage of your present liberty.”

“Hush, Agnes,” I said, “and remember your promise.”

“So I will, Dora; but I wanted to see a certain light come into your eyes. It is there now; so good night, and happy dreams.”

## CHAPTER XXI.

## ANOTHER VISITOR TO WATERMERE.

NOT all my entreaties, backed by the most pressing invitations from Arthur and his wife, could prevail on Madame de St. Morin to come forth from her retirement and join us in the delightful little excursions we made daily while the bride and bridegroom remained at Watermere. The children were suffered to go whenever I liked to take them, but the mother said she had done with society for ever, and that far from

being of benefit to her, any attempt to renew her intercourse with the world would only bring back memories and feelings which it was the study of her life to forget. She permitted me to introduce Agnes to her on the occasion of the latter's calling one day at the cottage, but they had only a brief interview; and as I saw it gave no pleasure to my poor friend, I never attempted to shake her resolution on this point again.

To me it was a week of almost unclouded enjoyment, for although I received no letter from Richard or Catherine, I felt sure that one would arrive ere long; and the faith that had been for a little season disturbed, was once more established on firmer and surer grounds than ever. I was happy too in witnessing the evidently increasing attachment of Arthur to his young and really devoted wife. Agnes was no longer the wild undisciplined school-girl I had first known; in this character she could never have attracted the

most casual of notice Arthur Vincent, whose reminiscences of the gentle, low-voiced Effie, would have acted as sentinels to keep out of his heart a guest of so opposite a nature; but Agnes, subdued by her long illness, and elevated into womanhood by a strong and pure affection, was a being of a different stamp, and even without the touching claim her continued delicacy of health gave her on her husband's tenderness, must in the end have won him to love her as she desired to be loved.

I was particularly struck with this thought when on the last day, which was the Sabbath, of their stay at Watermere, I joined them at the hotel, and found Agnes sitting like a little child at her husband's feet, while he taught her from the Word of God those solemn truths which in her youth she had put recklessly aside, and deemed unworthy of her serious consideration.

Now she was a willing, docile pupil; and the



soft, tender light shining in her eyes, as from time to time they were raised wonderingly or enquiringly to her husband's face, met with a response that must have been fully satisfying, in the affectionate, protecting, and indulgent expression that beamed upon her from his own.

"You see," said the smiling wife, as she rose to welcome me, "that Arthur has enough upon his hands. I am only hoping that he will not betray me to his mother as the most ignorant, shallow-headed girl, who ever thrust herself within the sacred pale of matronhood."

"I shall present you to my mother without a character at all, Agnes, and leave her to make the best she can of you."

"Oh, but I do so hope she will like me; this is the only anxiety in all the world I have at present."

Arthur stooped to kiss the fair face that was looking up with this mighty load of anxiety at

the moment, and with the kiss every shadow instantly dispersed, leaving a serene and gentle sunshine to add to the girlish charm and beauty of a countenance, that every day seemed to grow more lovely and attractive.

The next morning I bade them farewell with many regrets for myself, but quite as many wishes and prayers for their continued happiness; and after they were gone, though I returned cheerfully to the quiet mode of life their arrival had interrupted, I certainly began to think a little more of my individual prospects, and to wonder why Richard did not write to me.

Madame de St. Morin understood that I had for sometime been claimed by my friends in the south, and she was making every possible enquiry for a lady to supply my place; but in the midst of her search, which I had assisted to the best of my ability, a letter came from her old governess, Madame Boussin, asking if there was

any chance of her obtaining a good situation in England.

This decided the Comtesse on engaging her as a companion for herself, and thus avoiding the disagreeable necessity of taking a stranger into her family. The children were sufficiently advanced in English to pursue their studies without a governess, and Madame Boussin was quite competent to superintend the ornamental part of their education.

This arrangement made, there was nothing now to prevent my writing to the Errols and fixing the time of my return to them, and yet day after day went by, and the summer was hastening on; and still no letter was written.

I longed with every instinct of my nature to go—about this I had not the shadow of a doubt—but it seemed to me that until I heard from some of them again I should compromise myself by leaving my present abode, and the very con-

sciousness of wishing it so heartily, made me feel sure that the wish ought to be denied.

Until Madame Boussin came, there was not the smallest difficulty about the matter, as the Comtesse had from the first urged me not to leave her alone, but on the lively little French-woman's arrival, and installation in the cottage, any further delay would look strange and suspicious, and, more puzzled than I had been for a long time, I walked out by myself one evening in the direction of a favourite glen, to think calmly over what I considered my very awkward position.

I don't know whether the experience of other people is like my own—but to me it invariably happens that if I determine to occupy my thoughts on any particular subject, and set a time and a place apart for the purpose, that subject is certain to be the very last that presents itself, while a whole throng of widely dif-

ferent matters rush irreverently into my brain, and do their utmost to exclude the one which I am alone anxious to admit.

It was so now, in a curious and striking degree. The setting sun, the tinkling brooks, the changing forms of the purple clouds, the hundred reminiscences of old times with which the scenes around me were connected—all served to hold my wayward thought in bondage, and to hinder them from dwelling on the serious matters I would fain have made them entertain.

It was one of those rare seasons when the heart seems awake only to what is pleasant and soothing, when we feel a certain kind of happiness of which we can render no account, and when we think that a life of solitude and quiet contemplation, would suffice for our supreme beatitude as far as earth's possible bestowments are concerned.

I remember feeling sorry when the deepening shadows warned me that it was time to return home, and wishing that I had borrowed Charlotte, that I might have stayed to see the moon rise over the glen. I was not in the least afraid of being alone, but I knew the Comtesse would think it highly improper if I lingered after night-fall—and respecting her prejudices, even when I could not share them, I quitted my rustic seat beneath a gently whispering tree that, for the last half hour, had been lulling me with its delicious music, and bent my reluctant feet towards home.

It was nearly dark when I came in sight of the cottage, and I was close to it before I perceived a man leaning familiarly against the gate, and with his face turned towards the road.

Thinking it must be some friend of Charlotte's watching for her either to return or come from

the house, and knowing that the Comtesse had strictly forbidden her to receive any male visitors, I was on the point of asking the individual rather severely what he wanted there, when with an abrupt and quick step forward, the intruder seized my hands and almost took away my breath as he exclaimed:—

“You do not welcome me very warmly, Dora.”

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE GLEN.

“RICHARD — is it possible? You nearly frightened me to death.”

“I hope not for I was going to ask you (if you are not very tired) to retrace the steps you have just taken, and let me make acquaintance with some of your favourite haunts.”

“I am not in the least tired. I shall be very glad to stay out a little longer this beautiful night.”



“And by and bye we shall have a moon, shall we not?”

“Yes, but even without a moon I could guide you to any spot within eight miles of Watermere.”

(I was so confused, and glad, and happy, that I scarcely knew what I said.)

“But,” he replied, drawing my arm within his own, and beginning to walk slowly from the gate where we had been standing, “I am not fond of the dark, in the first place, Dora—and in the next place, I want to see how you are looking. Do you know how long it is since we have been separated?”

“Yes, I have kept a tolerably accurate account of the time.”

“And yet you appear to have made no effort to shorten it. I must take you to task for this presently. But now I want to hear whatever you can tell me of Arthur and his bride.”

This was happily thought of, and before I had got through half I had to communicate, (for I saw that Richard was deeply interested in the happiness of the newly married pair) my own composure was quite restored to me, and I in my turn became the questioner concerning all those he had left behind him, and the bride-sister in particular.

This general sort of conversation occupied us till we reached the glen I had so recently quitted; and here, as the moon had now risen in all its solemn beauty, we both stood still, by a common impulse, to admire the quiet but exquisite loveliness of the scene.

“Dora,” said my companion, after a long pause, during which neither of us had been disposed to speak, “you remember that when I first visited your unrivaled Watermere, you had neither the leisure nor the inclination to show me its beauties. Now I know you have the

first, and I am vain enough to hope and believe that you are not altogether deficient in the last. May I, on these grounds, engage the rooms our friends lately occupied, for a few days?"

"*May* you? Are you not sure what my answer will be?"

"Perhaps I am—but I have a great deal to say to you yet, so let us sit down in some place where the moonbeams are bright enough to show me your face, which I am sure will never fail to tell me the truth, even when the lips are silent."

I chose a smooth, open glade, about the middle of the glen—and we sat down.

"And now, Dora," continued Richard, after he had satisfied himself by a long, searching examination of my face—"as I see you are looking well, I need scarcely ask you whether the months you have spent away from me have been, upon the whole, happy ones—your countenance

assures me, at least, that they have not been the reverse."

"You are right. I have been moderately happy and cheerful during my stay at Watermere."

"And if you were certain that after to-night you and I should never meet in this world again, you would continue to be the same, is it not so?"

I thought it a cruel question, and it was some seconds ere I could reply—

"I should still endeavour to do my duty in life, and I am quite aware that this duty includes the cultivation of a contented and cheerful spirit."

"Right, Dora, perfectly right, and believe me I would not have it otherwise, that is to say,—all the wise and reasoning and serious part of my nature would not have it otherwise. Perhaps if the treacherous heart were consulted, it might

cry out a little against your answer, and intreat you, if you could, to modify it somewhat."

"I never knew you unreasonable or unjust before. What shall I do or say to please you?"

"Tell me you are glad to see me. Even *that* you have not said yet; and I came the very moment I was free."

"I *am* glad; if you can read faces so well as you profess to do, you must at least have read this plain truth in mine."

"Let me read it again. Do not turn away from me, Dora. I feel happiest when those soft eyes of yours are assuring *me* that this time I am not deceived."

"What do you mean?"

"I will tell you presently. But first let the great point be clearly understood. We are henceforth to go through life together, Dora, to fight its battles hand in hand, and if our Gra-

cious Father permit, to sleep at length side by side in the same spot, waiting for the glorious resurrection, in whose promises we have both alike a share. Speak, Dora, with your lips now as well as your eyes, and tell me that the prospect pleases you."

My heart beat audibly, but I did as he requested:

"Were a thousand of earth's brightest destinies placed before me, be assured I should choose no other than the one you offer. It includes all that my heart can imagine of human happiness."

"And ought I not to be satisfied now, my Dora?" he said, clasping my hand with grateful and earnest tenderness in his own; "ought I not to spare you a single additional confession until that bright day, when, as my precious wife, I can draw your heart to mine, and ask it for all its innocent secrets? I know I ought, but cir-

cumstances have made me very greedy of affection, and you must forgive me if I appear too exacting and unreasonable."

"And what are these circumstances to which you allude?"

"I will tell you in a few words, what indeed, as facts, you already know. Going back to a time that seems far more remote than it really is, I will ask you to recall the engagement that subsisted between Effie and myself, and the devoted, exclusive, and unquestioning love I had for her."

I winced a little at this reminiscence, but signified that I remembered it well.

Clasping closer the hand I had not withdrawn, as if to tell me I had nothing to fear, Richard continued:

"I have no reason to think that it was vanity which led me to place such full and implicit confidence in the strength and durability of Effie's

affection. Having once acknowledged that her heart was mine, she had, I imagined, done all that a woman could do to ensure the perfect faith and trust of the man she honoured with her regard; and I could as easily have doubted, in those days, the purity of the unfallen angels, as the constancy of the girl who was to be my wife. I am quite willing to admit that I may have been myself in some measure to blame for what subsequently happened, but it did not fall less heavily upon me on this account. The moment I knew that Effie's heart had wandered from me, that moment I felt I was altogether unsuited to her, and that I had failed entirely, even in those little outward acts which were due to her, and which might have bound her closer to me, ere another, worthier and more attractive, stepped in (unconsciously and innocently, I am sure) between us. But, however I might succeed in justifying Effie and blaming myself, I could in



no wise heal the wounds her inconstancy had inflicted. It seemed as if my very soul mourned its loss of trust, not only in her but in all woman-kind, for Effie had been to me but as the type and essence of that purity, and love, and honour which I saw shining as a halo round the whole of her sex. I will not dwell on what I suffered, Dora, even while forgiving her with all my heart, and cherishing her in its inmost recesses as tenderly, if not as reverentially as ever, for this would be little interesting to you. I will only say that the effect was to make me distrust entirely my own capability of inspiring true affection in a woman, and to look forward to a dull, grey life, uncheered by the only sunshine this life of ours really possesses.

“ And now it was, Dora, that your friendship, and the hope of doing you some little good, became the great interest of my existence. Nay, I will confess still further, that the useless wish often

crossed my mind that we had been brought together sooner, and that I had been privileged to win for myself a place in the heart of whose real inclinations I was uncertain. But Effie had left me a solemn charge, which was to promote, if ever I had an opportunity, your marriage with her father. You know, Dora, how I discharged this trust, but you do not know what it cost me. I believed you happy, however, and in this belief I strove to be content. I need not linger here upon that sudden and unexpected trial which fell upon you, and in which I truly sympathized. You were free again, and I saw no reason why I should not try to win you for my own, though the mistrust of myself, which Effie's inconstancy had inspired, was ever checking my hopes, and clouding all the horizon around me. I had determined, however, to tell you what was in my heart, and to have my fate decided, when poor Effie should have been dead a year; but

just before that period arrived, Agnes Seton came in the way, and I found that while I had been lecturing her as a child and trying to undo a little of the spoiling you had all effected, she had suffered her untrained imagination to invest me with some unreal attributes, and had then fallen in love with her own creation. I will acknowledge, Dora, that while we were at Leigh House together, I believed that you returned my affection; I felt certain of it indeed; and this made the position in which I was placed with respect to Agnes, especially trying and painful to me. The uncle assumed that the attachment was mutual, and fancied that it was only his niece's great wealth which hindered me from proposing for her. I said all I could, with a due regard to her delicacy, to undeceive him, but he would not be set right; and although I never for a passing instant contemplated marrying this wild, unformed school-girl, I did not

think it would be kind, or right in any way, to avow my attachment to another while she was on a sick bed, and still under the influence of feelings that I had unconsciously inspired and encouraged. I always hoped and expected that Arthur Vincent would again supplant me, and you may well believe, Dora, that I rejoiced unfeignedly when I found that he *had* done so; and yet, for I have promised myself to confess all my weakness, this second proof of my inability to retain a woman's heart gave me a certain shock, and caused me to doubt for awhile whether you, love, would be really true to me. Dora, I have now explained to you why I am so greedy and exacting on the score of affection, and why (while I have the fullest trust in the sincerity of your present regard for me) I seek and yearn for some token by which I may feel sure that it will abide with me to bless and gladden all my future life."

I had been agitated by such varied emotions while Richard was speaking, my heart had trembled so wildly in the joy of discovering how long and well he had loved me, that tears, happy tears, were for some minutes the only answer I could give him, but those kind, earnest eyes were looking so anxiously into mine, that I could not resist their pleading, and I spoke at length as frankly and truthfully as he had done.

“Richard, I would that all my heart were laid bare before you, that every fear you speak of might be lulled to rest for ever. Let me say, at least, that if the past can be any guarantee for the future, you may be fully satisfied, for in all my life I have loved but once, and this love, deep and true as I know it to be, seems but a poor and trifling gift to offer in return for yours.”

He did not speak, he only drew me close to

his heart for a few solemn minutes, during which I too lifted my soul in gratitude for the happiness I had so little deserved.

When our eyes met again, I read in his an intense and nameless joy, the very remembrance of which was sufficient in all my after life to sweeten every bitter cup that a wise Providence prepared for me.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## THE BLOOMING OF THE FLOWERS.

NEED I say that the few days Richard remained at Watermere were happy beyond all description? I was to return with him to London, but he had planned his little holiday, he said, that he might have me all to himself, ere, as his future wife, his family put in their claim to some portion of my society.

The weather was most lovely, and we were thus enabled to spend the greater part of every

day in the open air, often extending our rambles for miles around the village, and frequently taking Madame Boussin and the children as the companions of our excursions. There was no fear of our private converse ever being interrupted on these occasions, for the little girls were always occupied during the whole time, in searching for wild flowers and ferns, and Madame Boussin, even had she been wanting in that tact which is inseparable from an educated Frenchwoman, would have found ample amusement in discussing the contents of the well filled baskets we never failed to carry with us.

But these pleasant long-remembered, days soon came to an end; and with mutual regret—we were of course too happy for any stronger feeling—Richard and myself bade adieu to the sweet, peaceful scenes which had witnessed our first joy, and returned together to the home where so many loving hearts were waiting to receive us.



Even now, when so many years have elapsed, and life, with all its varied teachings, has assisted in dulling the remembrance of the past, I love to recall and dwell upon the affection lavished upon me at that time, by those dear ones to whom I was about to be related. They all said they had long felt that Richard and myself were made for each other, and if any proof of this had been wanting, it would have been supplied by the marked contrast between his conduct to me, and what it had been to Effie, during their engagement.

No stranger coming into the family could possibly have mistaken the relations existing between us, for on all and every occasion he claimed me publicly as his own, in a manner that caused infinite amusement as well as astonishment to those who remembered him in his former character of almost freezing reserve.

But Richard knew and felt now, that he was

well and truly beloved, and this knowledge opened his lips as well as expanded his heart, and surrounded him with a glad sunshine which it was my pride no less than my happiness to witness.

He was always home very early now, and if I was not found watching for him in the hall, it was sure to be "where is Dora?" before the door had even closed upon him. And then Mrs. Errol or Catherine would call to me to come to my impatient master, and smile as they watched us pass out into the garden together, and prophecy that I should never have a will of my own, or a moment to myself.

But little cared we for their prophecies or their smiles.

Richard wanted to be married as soon as Isabel returned home, but I had a fancy for the autumn when the leaves were growing golden, and the corn fields waving in the land, so in this

matter I had my way, and in the meanwhile Mr. Errol found us a delightful little house between Highgate and Hampstead, where I could imagine myself in the country and still be close to my husband's family, who shrank from the thought of any more partings from their children.

Towards the end of July the wanderers returned from Nice, and we had the satisfaction of seeing dear Isabel restored to perfect health, and as full of life and spirits as if she, and not Agnes, were Mrs. Arthur Vincent.

Mrs. Arthur herself had also greatly benefited by her travels, but she still looked pale enough to justify her fond uncle's frequent exclamations of thankfulness that her husband happened to be a medical man.

Jane and her husband came up to stay a fortnight with us on the occasion of Bella's return, and the old people seemed to grow young again in the enjoyment of this family meeting, and in

witnessing the happiness and contentment of their children.

Arthur and Agnes, who were now established in a fashionable and elegant London house, were our frequent guests, and always declared that their best and brightest days were spent at Highgate.

Just before the period fixed for my marriage, I joined the church of which Richard had so long been a member—he knew, and was glad to know, that I took this step from sincere conviction of its being a right one, and without having been in the remotest degree influenced to it by him, or any other human being.

And at length the time that was to seal my earthly destiny for ever, arrived, and before the altar of our little chapel, I plighted my willing faith to the man who possessed all my heart, and whom I should have gloried in calling husband as well as master in presence of the whole world.

The mellow Autumn sunshine was bathing the earth in its radiant light and all nature was clothed in the dress I delighted most to see it in; but far sweeter to me was the pure sunshine in my husband's eyes, and infinitely more attractive than nature's brightest adornings, the little plain gold ring that formed the outward symbol of our eternal union.

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And now, dear reader, what more shall I say concerning those years which have seemed so swiftly and imperceptibly to glide past me, since the time when I blended all my individual hopes and interests into the current of another life?

If I said that I had enjoyed unclouded happiness, my testimony would not be received, and I should be contradicting that blessed word which assures us that 'man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards,' but I may and must as-

sert, that in the midst of the inevitable and needed trials, that in common with all my fellow pilgrims I have experienced, a husband's love has been to me as a golden shield, a husband's heart as a pillow on which to lean my aching head.

With both of us the glowing noon of life is past for ever, but we look on little faces around us that promise soon to bring our vanished youth into sweet remembrance again, and, even were it otherwise, we have sufficient joy in the present, and sufficient hope in the future, to make advancing age a matter of trifling importance.

I have considerable difficulty in reckoning my grey hairs now, but when I bid Richard observe them, he points laughingly to his own whitening locks, which *I* think so graceful and becoming, and declares he does not see a bit of difference in me since the memorable evening in the glen at Watermere, when I told him he had been my

first and only love, and agreed to unite my fate with his for ever.

We live a great deal to ourselves, neither of us caring for general society, but our maiden sister Catherine—the gentle and the good—is of course our frequent guest, while we give in return whatever time we can spare to the dear old people at Highgate.

Jane and her husband continue happy and busy both in their parish and family, the latter having already amounted to six, of whom five are sturdy boys that require to be kept in order.

The Vincents have only one little girl of whom they are passionately fond, and who constitutes a very effectual link to bind their hearts together.

To both my dear husband and myself, Effie is a sweet and tender memory, which we often dwell upon in our hours of sacred converse. I know

that I have no reason to be jealous of the dead, for if ever wife could boast of possessing an undivided heart, that boast might be mine.

It was only the other day, that after receiving some touching proof of his continued and ever-watchful devotedness, I said to him with tears in my eyes :

“Richard, you will certainly spoil me, old woman that I am, if you persist in lavishing so much precious affection upon me.”

“Dora,” he replied gravely, encircling me in his arms as fondly as in days of yore, “don’t ask or expect me to do less than the heart, where you reign as queen, instinctively obliges me to do. And remember, dearest, that whatever you may be to others, to me you will always be young and fresh, and beautiful, since the Dora I first loved was thus stamped in ineffaceable colours on my soul for ever.”

“*Little children, keep yourselves from idols !*”



exclaimed Catherine, entering unnoticed at the concluding part of this loverlike speech.

“I hope,” replied my husband, “that your warning, dear Catherine, is for once unneeded, since both Dora and myself make it our constant prayer, to be kept from inordinate affection either towards our children or each other. In the sweetness of the stream we strive to realize the greater sweetness of the eternal source, and to look forward with humble hope to that blessed time when all earthly love shall be purified and exalted, and without one lingering taint of sin upon it, receive the seal of the Divine approval.”

THE END.



1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

